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PISTOL PARDS; or, SOFT HAND, THE SILENT SPORT FROM CINNABAR.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK OF HIGH PINE," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"I'M A STRANGER HYER, ALL THE WAY, LAST FROM CINNABAR; BUT I MUST OBSERVE I'M BACKING THIS MAN'S GAME."

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OR,

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CHAPTER I.

A DISCONSOLATE PILGRIM.

TIERRA ROXO, to give the settlement its Mexican name, was in the hight of its glory. Pilgrims came in and bullion and dust went out. There were miners, sports, bankers and bummers, men of every trade, profession and expectation under the sun, clustered together in the straggling camp that spread itself like the young mushroom that it was.

Next to the "Seven Angels," stage station and high-toned hotel, the most important building in the place was the "Star of Empire" saloon, an institution run on high pressure order as a drinking and gambling resort, and dance-house, by a man whose one, only name seemed to be Fritz.

Scattered through the camp there were other "shebangs," "hash-houses," "rum-mills," and the like; but these were by far the most pretentious buildings, and their proprietors were just coining money.

The host of the Seven Angels was a thoroughbred American, who had fallen on his feet as much through luck as by judgment, for he had come to Tierra Roxo away ahead of the rush, and installed himself in the valley as a stock-raiser, having purchased at a very moderate price the ranch, including the building which now did duty as a hotel, from its former proprietor, Don Jesu Comarcos.

From the north-bound stage, one pleasant afternoon, there dropped two travelers, one of them a slender built, consumptive-looking man of forty or fifty, it being hard to guess within ten years of his age on account of his sickly face and evident weakness. Side by side with him, and apparently ready to offer her shoulder in case he might need assistance, was a young woman. A little, slender mite of a thing, with the softest of blue eyes, hair of burnished gold, a petite form, and a short, dimpled hand. In that rude country she certainly looked like one who needed a protector herself, and it seemed like the irony of fate that she should be compelled to assume that role.

However, the gentleman, for such his manners and general appearance proclaimed him to be, seemed unconscious of the tender solicitude of the young lady; and, taking the lead, mounted, with slow but tolerably certain steps the porch of the Seven Angels, where he addressed himself to the host, Michael Mitchell, who was waiting to receive him.

He gave his name as Harold Wilkins, traveling northward, in company with his daughter; and stated that he intended to stop over until the next stage to recuperate, and take a view of the mining country around the town.

Of course he was duly welcomed, and managed to make himself very much at home; so much so that he hardly put a foot off of the porch the balance of the day, but sat in the shadow with his daughter by his side, though he looked around him, from time to time, with a nervous stare.

The following morning he seemed a great deal stronger than when he arrived, and set off for a stroll by himself.

When he returned his face had a troubled look; he took his old seat, and from that until dinner time was lost in his own thoughts, scarcely paying any attention to his daughter, who sat in silence by his side.

After dinner he brightened up again, and Mitchell, the landlord, ventured to approach him.

"Wal, sir, hope you found the place worth lookin' at. It ar'n't much of a town, I allow, by daylight, ez the men is mostly to work; but at night she blossoms up right peart. If a gentleman wants sport, then, he kin find bull wagon-loads of it at the Star. You ought ter look in there afore you leave camp."

Wilkins looked up with a quick, keen glance.

"How so, sir? Do I look like a sport?"

It was hard to tell whether the question was asked in anger or not. Michael Mitchell hesitated a moment before he answered:

"I dunno if you want a squar' answer; but

bein' a good deal used to men in a way, I should say you looked like a man that had taken chances. If that's sport, you've bin there."

A gloomy look overspread the face of the man as he heard the response; but there was nothing of anger in his voice as he answered:

"Yes, I have taken chances in my time, though not so many, perhaps, as you think, of the kind in vogue at the Star. It's the chance of life or death that I have taken, and I'm tired of it."

"Terribly wearin', ain't it? But I reckon things hes bin movin' along better of late. You look solid."

"You are mistaken. Go where I will and when I will it's always the same. I've struck such a chance coming here, I don't want Kate to know anything about it, but I feel it in my bones that there is trouble brewing for me. It's a little odd to talk of it to a perfect stranger, but when a man feels that way he wants to say something to somebody, and you look like an honest man, that can keep your own counsel."

"Oh, talk right up, if it does you any good; I can be as dumb as a clam. And, mebbe, if you were to tell me your trouble, I could help you out, someway."

"For that matter I don't know what it is. Perhaps it is sickness; perhaps it is bad luck; perhaps road-agents—I heard considerable said down yonder about a Captain Skull and his men who have been raiding on this route. Do you think there is much chance of our meeting him to-morrow?"

"That's hard to say; but he's wuss than his pictur', an' for the sake of yer darter I hope yer won't run foul of him. I did hear some one offerin' to take three to two that he would be heerd from this week ag'in. Mebbe you'd better stay till he's run off, er corraled. Hangtown ain't a half bad place to camp in."

"But I can't, I can't! For myself I tell you, I don't care; but for Kate to fall into their hands! Oh, I was mad to ever drag her to this country. If I was alone I would fight them to the death; but with her my hands seem tied."

"How would it do then to get some one to do the fighting? I don't know how many men Captain Skull may have in his band; but they say there's never more than half a dozen shows up at a time; and two or three good men, that could handle the fools, ought to stand them off. It might cost a little somethin' but you needn't pay 'em unless they put you through safe."

"True; but can those men be found? When you go to enlisting an army, in such a camp as this you're apt to get cut-throats that go over to the enemy at the first fire, or turn out bigger villains than the bandits."

"That's so, that's so; but you must pick the right sort. Chirk up a leetle. Ef I can't point out the men I can take you over to Fritz, that runs the Star, and he knows every pilgrim and sport in the deestrick. What he says you can tie to, if he does run a tough old ranch. He'll pick you out a pard or two that will see you over the road."

It may have been that the host was only talking for the sake of encouraging his guest, who seemed to be so down on his luck, and that the proposition to visit the Star was meant to divert his mind as much as anything else; but at any rate, after some hesitation and a refusal, Wilkins suddenly changed his mind.

"Why should I not?" he asked, his face brightening perceptibly. "I have not been inside of such a place for years, but I will go with you to the Star to-night and if I can find a man with the face I like I'll not stop at a thousand dollars for his insurance of a safe trip. Say nothing of this talk, however. It will be time enough to broach my wishes when I have seen this Fritz myself."

And in this way it happened that arrangements were made for a visit to the Star that night, and nothing was said of the why or wherefore to Kate, who hung, a little later, with such solicitude, over the shoulder of the disconsolate traveler.

CHAPTER II.

FIVE KNAVES TO ONE PACK.

LATE in the afternoon Wilkins and his daughter were standing together in front of the Angels. Father and daughter seemed in much better spirits than they had been, and Kate suddenly clapped her hands and burst into a laugh, such as one who had seen her on

the previous day, would scarcely have supposed could come from her troubled lips. Down the street was coming a single foot-passenger.

It was not the passenger himself, however, that brought the laugh to the lips of Kate, but the extraordinary looking quadruped that he was dragging along behind him.

Perhaps triped would be a better name, for the animal limped along on three legs, and at every third step manifested a decided inclination to halt. As for the rest, it was a little, lean, scrubby, Indian pony, with hogged mane, and, comparatively speaking, no tail at all.

Just in front of the Seven Angels the singular procession came to a halt, and immediately the cayouse dropped its head, folded its ears, and twisted its lips and nostrils with a general expression of sorrowing resignation that would have been heart-breaking if it had not been so comical.

At the further end of the porch there was a little cluster of half a dozen men; and these burst into a hoarse laugh, causing Kate, who was already ashamed of her merriment, to draw back into the shadow of a convenient doorway.

The pedestrian gave no sign of having noticed her. In fact he looked like a man who would not be affected by trifles. If he was not larger than his pony, he belied his appearance wonderfully. For dress and equipment he had a broad Mexican hat, a miner's shirt of blue flannel, wide corduroy pants, stuffed into the tops of a pair of high-legged but remarkably well made boots, and around his waist the usual belt of weapons.

As he halted, with one huge paw he struck the wide brim of his sombrero, with a gesture that might or might not be intended for salutation, and addressed himself to Wilkins:

"I've bin a long time on ther road, pard, but I'm hyer et last; you want me, sa-a-y?"

Surprised by the unexpected address, Wilkins held his ground, nevertheless, and answered with a cheerful coolness scarcely to be expected from the man.

"I can't say that I do. I'm a stranger here, just passing through, and if I ever get out of this heaven-forsaken country, and into civilization once more, I'll hardly make a fool of myself—this way at least."

"Waal, no offense, stranger, ef stranger yer be. Yer look like a man thet wants suthin', an' I thought mebbe it war me. P'raps it's ther cayouse. Ef it's him, buy him; he's fur sale. Clipper-rigged, copper-fastened A No. 1! I tell yer he's a howler. Jist turn him out ter grass fur a week an' he'll make a war hoss that'd do yer proud, though I'll allow thet jist now he ain't on ther snort so much ez a prancing warrior might want ter see."

"Thank you, I have no use for the pony. I'm afraid that if I staid here, waiting for him to get into condition, I would die of old age."

"Oh, yer can't guess how quick he'll fatten up ef yer give him a rest. An' he's no slouch ov a pony, either; carried me more ner three hundred mile the last week, an' would 'a' come in jist snortin' ef he hedn't got a 'Pash arrer in thet off hind leg. Fact ar', stranger, I must sell him. I ain't fond er walkin' meself, an' ez he can't kerry me jist now I'll hev to raise rocks on him so's I kin take ther north-bound stage to-morrer. I'm bu'sted wide open, yer see."

At this frank statement of his condition Wilkins only shook his head.

"So long, then; an' ef yer change yer mind 'bout ther war-hoss sing out fur Alabaster Jim. I'll be 'round somewheres, fur I can't git out afore to-morrer."

Waiting fur no answer the man hooked the reins over his arm once more, gave a jerk to arouse the sorrowful-looking cayouse, and the procession again moved on.

"Perhaps that is the very man I want," muttered Wilkins thoughtfully. "He looks like a bold, dashing fellow, tolerably honest, and full of nerve. But, somehow, his face seems familiar. Where have I seen him?"

He pointed him out to Mitchell, who happened along just then, but the landlord shook his head. Although nothing but the back of Alabaster Jim was visible he declared that it must be some new-comer, or he would certainly be able to recognize him. There were to his certain knowledge, no such man and pony belonging to the camp. And while the eyes of the two followed the retreating figures a horseman approached, unperceived, the Seven Angels.

As the eyes of this new-comer were everywhere he saw the two conferring together, and on the instant gave a great start. Then, bending forward in the saddle, he touched his horse with his spurs, and went by at a gallop, giving another short, sharp glance, just as Wilkins and the landlord turned toward the open door.

"Who is that?" hastily asked the troublesome guest, though he did not give more than a casual look at the bent form that flew past at almost racing speed.

"That? Oh, that is Colonel Dashwood. Smart man; often stops here, but find him oftener at the Star. He's farming sheep for all the thing's worth, an' 'll get rich if he don't lose it all fingering the pasteboards too much. Wish he'd stopped in; you ought to meet the colonel. He could post you up, an' mebbe take you through himself. He just about runs this town."

But as the original question was only asked through momentary curiosity, the subject was dropped; and even had it been pursued ever so far the two could hardly have dreamed of the strange look upon the face of the colonel as he galloped on through the camp, and finally dismounted near a rum-mill of the harder sort, known as Hoodlum Hall. He entered that delectable resort in a furtive sort of way, and remained there some time.

That evening, before starting out on the projected visit, the nature of which he did not confide to Kate, Wilkins took a generous pull from the private flask of his host, and then followed without the faintest show of hesitation. It was evident that, though he might have fears of some kind or other, they were not for the roughs and hard cases he might meet in a mining town.

When they arrived the Star was in the full swing of its rushing business, and they entered without attracting any attention.

Fritz, the proprietor, and his assistants, were busy as bees; and Wilkins and his conductor took up their position at a vacant table near the bar, where they would have a good opportunity of seeing the frequenters of the room.

There were plenty of men, though this was an off night at the Star, but there was none there that particularly attracted Wilkins. The crowd seemed to be composed of but two classes; villainous, hang-dog looking men, to whom he would not intrust the value of a farthing, and miners who might have both honesty and nerve, but hardly the care and skill on which he could confidently rely.

Wilkins's face was growing long, and there was a look of weariness in his eyes. He had just about made up his mind to take leave of the place when through the door there came the man who had tried that afternoon to sell him the three-legged pony; and immediately behind him a man who at once attracted his attention.

He was a well-built, sinewy man, quiet in dress and manner, with a soft gray eye, a bronze beard and mustache, and a light, quiet step. From the way he glanced around him it was evident that he was a stranger in the place, though he was one to fall naturally into its ways. He stopped a moment at the bar, after the usual formula, and then advanced to the doorway that led into a smaller room, where the gaming was done.

"That's my man, if I can get him," whispered Wilkins, decisively. "That man in the white shirt. He's my man for a thousand. Move up a little closer; I want to watch him."

The devotees of fortune generally had their choice of games at the Star; for, in addition to short cards, there was a faro lay-out; and when business justified, and the Mexican dealer, Pedro Mercado, was present, a monte table added to the attractions. The stranger in the bronze beard invested a few dollars in faro chips, and quietly took his place at the table. He only ventured small amounts, but winning or losing he remained just the same.

Meantime Wilkins and the hotel-keeper, having followed into the gambling room, were accosted by a man who rose from one of the side tables at their appearance.

"Good-evening, Mitchell! Have you and your friend come to the Star to try your fortune? If so I claim you as an adversary. That one game of ours was a drawn one, and I've been itching ever since to try your strength again. Why, man alive, with such nerve and judgment as you've got, you've no business running a hotel. It's beneath you. A few turns of the wrist and you'd be a millionaire. If I had had your cool head I'd not

be down here herding sheep. I'd be in 'Frisco, dealing for stocks without a flyer."

The speaker was Colonel Dashwood, and though his words were addressed to Mitchell his eyes, from time to time, were fixed upon Wilkins, with a keen, questioning, and even anxious look.

But Wilkins was studying the face of the man at the faro table, and scarcely heard a word until his companion touched him lightly on the shoulder and introduced him to the colonel, at the same time remarking:

"Colonel Dashwood was just bantering us for a game; but I told him we're only lookin' on to-night, and I'll allow he kin swamp me without tryin' half. He's a four-decker at keards, ez well ez everything else. I'll quit afore I begin, an' save my bacon."

"Oh, come now, Mitchell, I'm no sharp, and you know it. Just a summer game fer a little amusement won't hurt anybody."

Mitchell made some laughing remark and thought that the thing would end there, but Dashwood was persistent, though he managed to avoid being at all offensive, and by and by Wilkins, upon whom, perhaps, the whisky he had taken had made some impression, suggested that as they were in Rome they might as well play cards with the Romans, provided they were not going to pay too high for their initiation.

Between a smile and a sigh Mitchell gave his assent, and the three adjourned to a small side table in the further corner of the room.

"Shall we hunt a fourth man; or shall we just have a little tea party of our own?" asked the colonel, as they seated themselves; of course his actions showed that his preference was for the latter.

"Three will be company enough in this case, for it's not worth while to trouble any one else to join in for the hand or two that I will play."

"Just as you have it," said the colonel, and the cards being produced the game began.

Although he had stated that he had not touched cards for years, it was at once apparent that Wilkins was no novice in the art of poker. He shuffled and dealt with all the grace of an expert; and what was more, he won steadily, though but little; and Mitchell, finding that the run of luck was against him held out without any regard for his reputation as a man of nerve, and finally jumped the game.

It turned out not to be a summer game, of a few hands, either, for the end of an hour found the two men facing each other with the gambling fire hot in their eyes, and several thousand dollars spread out on the table between them.

Around was a crowd of spectators, deeply interested; for Colonel Dashwood was well known at the Star, and rough though they were the majority were his friends, and seemed astonished that this stranger should be so steadily a winner.

Mitchell was troubled, too, but in a different way. He watched the colonel closely, though in a furtive way. He felt that there was something wrong brewing, though the crisis came in a way he hardly expected.

As Wilkins drew in a hundred dollars on a hand of four knaves there was an ominous twinkle in Dashwood's eyes, as he quietly said:

"Excuse me, but I'll take that pot, if you please."

Wilkins looked up sharply.

"You called your hand at three queens. There's hardly any nonsense about you."

"Three queens was the heft of my hand; but behind them is another Jack. This pack has five jacks, and you put the odd one in. I thought it queer that you held fours so often. If these men will look in your lap, or up your sleeve, I wouldn't be surprised if they found more of the same sort."

"Warp it to him, kunnel," shouted a bystander. "Thar's ther ace of spades under his stool, whar it dropped. He's a cut-throat shark, kim here to play sharp."

Wilkins did not notice this harsh interruption. First he looked up at his *vis-a-vis* in a dazed sort of way, and then, as he realized the full enormity of the charge against him, he raised up from his stool and threw himself bodily upon the colonel, forgetful alike of his convenient weapons, and his enfeebled frame, so little fitted for a hand-to-hand struggle with the stout sheep king.

Dashwood sprung his trap with a delighted snarl. No weapon did he draw, either; but

seizing the infuriated man by throat and thigh he tore him from his feet and flung him to the floor.

Then, with heels drooping down, ready to mash his face beyond recognition, the colonel sprung into the air, immediately above the head of Wilkins.

CHAPTER III.

PINNED TO THE WALL.

It is a question whether pistol and knife are nearly as brutal as the ways of a rough-and-tumble fighter. Everything passed so quickly that Mitchell had not time to interfere. Before he could guess what was coming his companion was down, Dashwood was springing upon him, and he actually turned his face away as he recognized the intent of the latter.

But the heels of Colonel Dashwood, expert fighter though he was, did not land upon the face of Wilkins; nor did they even strike the floor at once. As he leaped, one of the bystanders bent quietly forward and caught him on the fly, turning him around with a strength even greater than his own, and flinging him to the further end of the room. It was the bronze-bearded man who had attracted the attention of Wilkins, who thus interfered. Then he stood quietly looking on, as though his concern with the affair had ended.

The spectators knew better than that, and their attention was so thoroughly centered on him that Mitchell had a chance to drag his friend out of harm's way.

Up from the floor sprung the colonel; glaring around him, uncertain upon whom to wreak his wrath, since he had not seen his assailant at all.

"Where is the hound that caught me from behind?" he shouted. "Was it that milk-and-water fraud from the Seven Angels? Whoever it was, I'll have his blood; his heart's blood!"

The bronze-bearded man had no intention of shirking the responsibility, but before he could speak another voice chipped in:

"I reckon it must be me you're shoutin' fur; but I wouldn't talk quite so strong; not quite so strong. I rile, myself, sometimes; specially when I've got hold ov ther long end er ther string, ez I bes this time. Yer a liar an' a cheat, an' ef yer don't like that, I'm yer dough-nut."

It was Alabaster Jim proclaiming himself, and he coolly slid in front of the bronze-bearded man, who stood immovable and with folded arms, neither shunning nor seeking a fray.

Toward his waist dropped the hand of the colonel, as he sprung straight toward his challenger, and half-way from its sheath rose his ready knife; but Alabaster Jim was as quick with hand and foot as with tongue. Without any apparent effort, he gave an unexpected bound, and then threw his right fist straight from the shoulder out.

Again Dashwood struck the floor, nearly leveling two or three men in his journey, the force of his fall being in that way broken a little, but his head none the less feeling the effects of the good, solid blow, that almost bereft him of his senses.

At this a howl arose. So far, no one had time to interfere; but now, Alabaster Jim having attracted all attention to himself, the bystanders seemed inclined to take hold where Dashwood was leaving off. Up sprung one Dave Hawley, the boss of Hoodlum Hall, pointing with grimy finger at Alabaster Jim.

"See hyer, boys, I reckon none of you knows this chap, an' none of ye wants to, so we'd better waltz him right outer camp. He's a card sharp, an' a stabber, an' ther side pardner ov ther cuss ther kunnel caught cheatin'. We don't want no skin games hyer, fur ef a man can't sit down to a squar' deal an' fair play thar ain't no use for pasteboards. Yer all seen how the kunnel ketched his pardner hold-in' out keards, an' wringin' in ther sorts from a cold deck, an' how ther yaller-headed duck chipped in. I move we give two on 'em five minutes to git out ov town, an' ride this 'un out on a ridge-pole."

Half a dozen voices joined in with such words as:

"That's the talk! Give 'em the grand bounce!"

"Better string 'em up fur good luck!"

"We don't want no sich cattle hyar!"

"Oh, dog gone you, you think I'm no sport do you?" broke in Alabaster Jim, slapping his hands together, and sweeping his eyes around

in a flashing glance. "Why, I'm ther bald-headed loon on nine wheels; an' I'm chuck full ov fun from heel to top-knot. Run me out, will yer? Not ef this hyer infant knows herself. Jest two er three ov you chaps that howls ther loudest come an' taste me, an' I'll sweeten up the hull crowd that backs up any sich galoot ez ther kunnel. He raised a row an' got salted down. He's the duck that turned ther cards, an' ef Hangtown war half ez good ez its name they'd roust him out. But what yer goin' fur me fur?"

"Dry up on that," interposed Hawley, sternly. "All the cheating done was by your pard, and the crowd hyer knows it."

"Yer couldn't git fuder from the truth with four horses an' a wheelbarrer, an' yer a natural born liar. I don't know ther stranger from Adam, an' I don't know but that he is Adam," responded Alabaster Jim, in a cheerful tone. "What I do know is thet I watched ther game an' I'll swear all ther cheatin' war done by ther man I just pasted, ther galoot you call kunnel. Ez fur leavin' town, I've done nothin' hyer to rile any one but that man yonder, an' I'm waitin' to hev it out with him."

"That's all thin," began Jack Brace, another of the Dave Hawley kind. "After what we seen sich talk settles the matter. You'll hev to git."

He too was feeling for his weapons. It would require very little to start a general row; and perhaps that was what some were hoping for; but Colonel Dashwood had shaken himself together, and once more he came to the front, his voice breaking in, hoarse with vengeful rage.

"But, first of all he settles with me. He has struck me and I'll wash out that blow with his blood yet."

This time his hand was on his revolver; it was out; the hammer was back; and though he stood at the further end of the room he had Alabaster Jim covered with his eyes, ready to seize the drop on him at a motion.

"I reckon yer not in a hurry about startin' that sport. Bang away hyer, an' ther chances is you'll plug about three ov yer friends. Let 'em stand to one side, an' then you blaze. You can't hit the side ov a barn."

There was a provoking coolness about the man that would have stirred all the blood in the colonel, had it not been red-hot already. To one side and the other sprung his friends, while he slowly raised his revolver to a level, with as much outward calm as though taking aim at a mark on a post. It looked as though some one's time had come.

But Alabaster Jim was no greenhorn, and he had no intention of passing in his checks, though it seemed impossible for him to draw the weapons still in his belt and bring them to a level before Dashwood could fire.

He did not attempt it.

His hand, hanging carelessly by his side, suddenly caught from the belt of the bronze-bearded man who stood silent and motionless, just at his shoulder, a long-bladed, keen-edged bowie-knife; and with the same motion, that was steady and sure, he flung the weapon up, and around the back of his neck, just a twinkling before the colonel was ready to pull the trigger.

The knife left his fingers, made a half-turn, plunged through the air like a gleam of light, sailing, point forward, straight for Colonel Dashwood, who saw it coming. Full of grit though he was, he turned his face as he fired.

The involuntary motion saved both men, for the bullet went whistling over, only an inch or two too high, while the heavy knife missed the throat at which it was aimed.

Yet it did not fail altogether in its ghastly errand, for right between the lips of the colonel it passed, and on through his cheek, actually pinning him against the wall, while the blood spouted out over beard and breast in a sickening stream.

There was a buzz of surprise from the lips of some; coarse oaths fell from the lips of others, but for an instant no one else was exactly ready to move, and in that instant Alabaster Jim whipped out his revolvers and stood leaning back, with his eyes covering in a comprehensive way, the whole room full of excited men.

Nor was he altogether alone, for the man with the bronze beard dropped his hands on his own weapons, and quietly remarked in a tone just loud enough to be heard by every one:

"I'm a stranger hyer, all the way, last from Cinnabar; but I must observe I'm backing this man's game."

At the same time he placed himself by the side of Alabaster Jim.

CHAPTER IV.

COLONEL DASHWOOD JUMPS THE GAME.

COLONEL DASHWOOD was a very well-known man to the people of the camp; and without being particularly popular it was not singular that at first thought his cause should be espoused, as against total strangers. He was a citizen; always had plenty of money; and if he did not labor with his own hands he had an occupation that gave employment to others. Perhaps if Dave Hawley, and two or three more of his set, had kept a little in the background their desires might have been accomplished with a good deal less risk, to themselves.

But it happened that three or four very fair-minded men were there, who had been watching the game; and as Wilkins was a stranger and had what seemed exceptional good luck, their attention had been directed principally to him.

Now these men were willing to back their eyesight with money. As they had not seen Harold Wilkins working any advantages, they were certain that he, at least, had been playing a square game, and were actually inclined to see that the strangers had something like fair play, and a chance to settle it somehow themselves with the colonel.

In addition, the fact that Michael Mitchell was in a way a voucher for the man who came with him, had its effect. Alabaster Jim and the man from Cinnabar had not a unanimous camp to face, though in that crowd they could not know friend from foe. It was fortunate for them that just then came a diversion, that directed attention from the two defiant men who stood ready to meet all comers.

The immediate friends of the colonel had the kindness, to release him from his painful position. That occupied them for a moment.

He was a frightful looking object though the wound of itself was not at all likely to prove fatal. It was a straight, clean cut, through and through the cheek, and bled profusely; but he had had worse wounds in the course of his life, and this hardly put him out of the battle, though it sickened him in spite of himself.

"Give me a pistol, some one!" he mumbled; and reached out a wavering hand. "I'll settle this thing right here or you kin put me to bed with a shovel. It's Tom Dashwood he's mounted, an' afore he gets through he'll find him hard to climb."

"Hold on, kunnel," interposed Jack Brace. "You ain't fit to play blue pills with a regular driver like him. Lay off an' we'll handle ther ribbons fur you in style."

Half a dozen others added their protest and their promise; but the fact was there was some hesitation about attacking the cool pair, who seemed to care little what decision was arrived at.

"Oh, give him a pistol, somebody," sung out Alabaster Jim. "Give him two er three pistols. He's a slayer from Slayersville, he is; an' wants to wade round hyer in gore; me an' my pard is just waitin' fur ther fun to begin."

And while the two parties faced each other, Harold Wilkins, who had revived a little, made his voice heard, and his presence visible. He broke away from Mitchell, and staggered toward the men who had made his quarrel their own.

The landlord of the Seven Angels tried to hold him back; for, believing that there was a strong chance for every one to drift into a general row, he wanted to get Wilkins away before it began; but the latter exclaimed angrily:

"Let me go, Mitchell! I'm no cur, and as long as I can raise a finger I'll ask no man to fight my battles unless I'm fighting with him."

As he ranged up by the side of Alabaster Jim, there were two reports, one right after the other, and Red Dave Hawley dropped his revolver as though it was red-hot. He had taken a snap shot at the man with whom the row had begun, his hand held low down; and only for a sharp eye, and a quick, true hand it would have ended the life of Harold Wilkins, then and there.

But at the same moment the man from Cinnabar, whose gaze seemed to be every-

where saw what was coming, and check-mated the move; for raising his own pistol just a trifle, he pulled his trigger a shade the soonest.

It was a wonderfully good shot, if it was intended to do bloodless work. The ball struck the end of the pistol-cylinder, thus throwing up the muzzle, and though the weapon was discharged it was by chance rather than intention, and Hawley, too surprised to understand exactly what had happened, dropped the revolver, shook his hand as though some one had been rapping him over the knuckles, and considered himself, for the present at least, as counted out.

It was natural to suppose that these two reports would be followed by a regular fusillade, but such was not the case, for the shots were echoed by a scream, short and half suppressed, but unmistakably from a woman's lips. Then through the open door that led to the larger room, Kate Wilkins came flying. Through the crowd that stood in her way she burst, and flung her arms around her father's neck.

"Are you men?" she shouted, and she looked defiantly around, "that you would see a man with one foot in the grave, murdered to gratify the malice of a fiend in human shape? It shall not be so, unless you kill me first. Here! The bullet that strikes him must pass through me!"

Women were no strangers to the Star of Empire; but not such as this. There was nothing of the Maenad about this little mite of a being who came flying to the rescue. Her face seemed full to the lips of truth and innocence, as well as all womanly courage, and on the instant there was more than one rough miner, or reckless sport, who was ready to do her honor. As she turned her face, brave yet blushing; toward the crowd, she was a weapon more effective than half a dozen revolvers. Again the fray received a check, just when it seemed likely to end in a *melee*. Indeed, Alabaster Jim rather endeared himself to everybody but the special backers of the colonel by the prompt way in which he answered her general appeal.

"Bless yer heart, miss, nobody ain't going to hurt your father. This is just a little frolic fer the boys. Why thar ain't a man hyer that wouldn't chip right in ther hull size ov his pile ef he see'd he war in danger. Ther fun's about over now, though; an' es maybe ther Star ain't an interestin' place, p'raps he'd better walk along back with you to the Angels."

"But they told me up there that they were murdering him."

Kate looked around in a bewildered sort of way, and her eyes falling upon the group in the further end of the room she did not hear the response of the irrepressible:

"Folks will talk; an' savin' yer presence, miss, they will lie. Nobody's ever murdered hyer; it's only fun."

Nevertheless she knew it was not often that two parties were so arrayed against each other, without something deadly coming out of it, and her eyes were fixed upon one man in a questioning stare. It was Colonel Dashwood, who had recovered full consciousness, and strength. Almost the first thing he saw was the fair haired girl, with her arms around her father's neck, and her gaze resting in horror upon his ghastly-looking face.

He started, and then turned away, just in time to avoid meeting her eyes, while it was clear that that one glance had been sufficient to work a change in his purposes. As though the men with whom he had started what seemed to be a mortal quarrel were no longer in the room, he staggered up to Hawley, and placing his hand upon his shoulder, whispered:

"Wait! The fun will come, but this is not the time and place—I can't shoot these men down now without raising a stir that I want to avoid; and you men have bungled the work since it came into your hands. Draw out now; I mean it."

The command was a positive one, and Hawley, behind whom seemed to be trailing half a dozen others, did not hesitate to obey.

Then the colonel turned to Harold Wilkins, and his words were plain if his voice was strangely altered.

"I have shown you up as the cheat that you are—now, for the sake of this woman, your daughter, I offer you a chance to retreat; but if you don't take it promptly I'll kill you on sight. Either leave this place by the next stage or settle with knife and pistol when we

meet. As for this cattle—they had better leave on the same boat."

Wilkins forgot the presence of the girl. His hand dropped to his revolver. "Now, let it be now!" he began; but Kate threw her arm around his neck and placed her hand upon his lips, while the colonel, waiting for no answer, and supported by a couple of stalwart men, wheeled and disappeared through the side door which was conveniently near.

CHAPTER V.

JONES OF CINNABAR SIGNS A POLICY.

ALABASTER JIM seemed rather more puzzled than the rest at the lame and impotent conclusion of the row.

"Well, dog-gone my topknot ef I'd 'a' b'leved it! I thort that kunnel war full ov sand, chock-full. It war him I war layin' fur; just holdin' off with four kings an' an ace, because I thought when he come to, things would be lively fur the boys. He ain't no slouch with ther tools, I kin tell by the twinkle ov his eyes—an', mister, I'm sorry to say he ain't done with you yit. Ef you want to save your topknot you'd better git. So long, now; I've got to go an' look after my war-horse. Some ov them cusses would just be mean enough to steal it, to git outer town."

Free, easy and careless, he strolled out of the door, apparently without the least concern for the fact that he might run against three or four men who were his deadly foes.

Kate Wilkins heard his advice to her father, and was by no means inclined to overlook it.

"Come!" she whispered, drawing him toward the other door, through which she had entered. "Let us go. There is nothing to keep us longer in this dreadful place. While these men are busy with their talk, let us slip out."

"Take your daughter's advice," added Mitchell, who heard the whisper. "All this thing gets me, and I don't guess what's coming next. You're not the man to be runnin' your head into gamblin'-house rows, nohow. Come on! If I get you safe to the Angels I'll keep you under kiver until I see you both on the stage, an' then I'll forgit that two sich people ever lived. You're no end of bother; but I don't go back on a man I've took up with."

Wilkins seemed to see the propriety of following this advice, but hung back a little. The man with the bronze beard was still standing near, his arms folded, and the look of quiet unconcern still upon his face. He turned his head swiftly, as the man whom he had befriended tapped him lightly on the arm, but he manifested no surprise or interest; he was ready to listen, that was all.

"If you have nothing better to do would you come with me? I have something to say to you—a proposition to make that may or may not suit you. This is not the place for an interview, and I would like to have a few moments of your time at the Angels, where I am stopping."

"I'm with you, if you do the talking. And I ain't half bad company fer a sick man like you. Sail on."

When they reached the street Mitchell gave a careful glance around. He half expected to meet Colonel Dashwood, or some of the bullies that had dropped into his train band with such marvelous quickness. If they were not following in the footsteps of Alabaster Jim he was almost certain that they would pay some attention to Wilkins on his way to the Angels, short though the distance was.

But for once the astute hotel proprietor was amiss in his conjectures, for nowhere could he obtain a glimpse of any lurking conspirators; and the four walked unmolested away.

When they had gained a fair offing Wilkins motioned to his daughter to go on with Mitchell, while he began his conversation with the man from Cinnabar.

"I want to thank you for standing up, in company with that other stranger, for me. Mitchell means well enough, I can see, but he is not the man that can cope with such roughs as those who would have attacked me there. It was part of a preconcerted scheme, and to you I owe my life, I am certain."

"Don't say too much. Talk is cheap, and I don't thank a man for it. When I ought to be around you generally find me there."

"No, but I have reason to believe that there was more in this thing than appears on the surface. I do not know this Colonel Dashwood, but he knows me, or I am much mistaken, and it was and is his intention that I shall not leave

this place alive. He is not done with me; and, to sum up in a few words, that can perhaps be said as well here as elsewhere, for a fair compensation will you give me a few days of your time?"

"That's business, not talk. What do you want?"

"I'll tell you that I went to the Star to-night to find a man—or men—who would take me through on this stage route, and yours was the only face I saw that I felt as though I could trust. Even if this fracas had not occurred I would have spoken to you before the evening was over. Name your figure, and if it is not too high it shall be yours if you will agree to see me safely through the fifty miles north of this. From there I can, I think, safely make my way to San Francisco."

"What's the danger? I'm not a general fire and accident insurance company, but I'll allow, in this case, I feel like taking hold if you can give a reason."

"I've a premonition of trouble. I didn't know what it might be until some one said, 'road-agents.'"

Then he bent over and lowered his voice to a whisper that was scarcely audible to the sharp ears of the man from Cinnabar.

"It's a game that Captain Skull might choose to play for, if he knew of it, and the stake is three millions. Do you wonder that I am nervous?"

"Three millions and a handsome woman! No; I don't wonder that you think he'd go for that with everything that was out; but I don't see what that amount is drifting around here for. You haven't got that sum about you, have you?"

"Oh, no, no. But it is worth three millions to somebody if I never turn up in San Francisco; and somehow I have an idea that fate is looking that way now. Then what would become of Kate?"

"I've something else to do besides riding round the country; but I've got in the mix until I see you out. Old man, you may count on me for the trip. Then I'm off."

The man from Cinnabar, who up to this time had spoken in a slow hesitating tone, suddenly changed in manner. He spoke with quick decision, and held out a hand which closed over the one placed in it with a warm grasp.

"Enlist our army, if you choose—the man who took my part at the Star to-night, might make a good lieutenant. At all events, he has nerve and skill, though he seems reckless. Alabaster Jim, I believe he calls himself. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Friends with me are scarce, and this is the first time I've struck him. You can have him if you want him, but I reckon I'd better run the deal through alone. He goes out on the stage, anyhow, but it ain't always so certain which side chaps like him are going to take. He's a rustling pard, though, where he does freeze on."

"And as we seem apt to see considerable of each other, couldn't you give me a better handle than the man from Cinnabar?"

"Oh, I'm not particular. I generally let every camp fix a name to suit itself. Cinnabar Charley—no, it was Soft Hand, was the handle I carried down on the Feather river. Call me Jones if you want to; it makes no difference."

And with this careless and uncertain act of baptism, the Seven Angels was reached, and the canvass of the few arrangements necessary for the journey of the following day was begun.

CHAPTER VI.

CHECK TO THE KING—OF ROAD AGENTS.

HALF an hour before sundown two travelers on horseback plunged into the pass, through which ran the stage route, half a dozen miles to the north of Tierra Roxo.

One of these travelers was a fine-looking man, near the middle age, tall, stoutly built, and seemingly of untiring muscle and nerve. By his side rode a woman.

Very handsome was she, though the first bloom of her youth was gone, with a graceful figure, faultlessly developed and her face though bronzed somewhat by life in the open air, was full of a vivid beauty. Only her dark eyes had a look that said that she was one who could hate as well as love, and in either case, to the death.

Into the pass these two silently rode; and careless through long continued safety they

had no thought of threatening danger when suddenly as they reached a slight bend in the canyon they found themselves involved in a drama from which there seemed no escape until they had played their part.

From the cover of a huge rock, almost beside them, there arose two muscular ruffians with a pistol in either hand, and masked faces, who took steady aim, almost before their presence was observed, at the same time together exclaiming in a low, stern tone:

"Halt thar, an' be silent! Make a move er a sound an' ye'll drop on ther spot. Shet yer hands together, hold 'em up, an' wait till ther frolic is over beyand. Then we'll tend to you, mebbe."

Victor Page, as the man was named who was thus menaced, was no stranger to the ways of this wickedest part of the world. He was cool as an iceberg, moreover, and quick to see when the chances were against him. It took no very sharp eye to see that the muzzles covered them in perfect line, and that if the triggers were drawn the result would be certain death.

Under such circumstances it would be policy to wait awhile, to temporize; for matters could scarcely arrange themselves in worse shape, and they might take a great deal better.

Accordingly Page did as he was bidden, clasping his hands and holding them above his head, while Varr'a Page, the woman at his side, did likewise.

Then each of the road-agents returned one pistol to its holster, and stepping forward a pace or two, caught a bridle rein, and led the horses close to the rocky wall of the canyon, where in a niche, they would be screened from observation.

"Now, keep quiet till we take ther gag off, er we'll lay yer cold forever."

The threat was delivered in a low tone, as if to avoid the chance of being heard beyond the turn of the pass.

If they were not to use their mouths, their ears were at their disposal, and Victor Page and his sister listened in silence to catch the sounds which they believed they must soon hear.

Nor were they mistaken, since they had not thus remained more than a minute or two when there was the noise of hoofs and wheels. A coach was coming along toward the spot at a swinging pace.

Then came the customary hail:

"Halt thar, driver! Up with yer hands an' down with yer brakes, er they'll be dead meat!"

Very suddenly indeed was the stop made, for there were few drivers who did not understand that if they halted their persons would be safe, unless some passenger, imprudently cutting up rough, should bring upon them an accidental shot; while if they attempted to rush on through, they stood a very good chance of getting a ball between shoulders, besides losing a horse or two; and the stage companies in a quiet sort of way resented such nonsense. A driver who was bull-headed enough to lose a team would be apt to find himself without a job when he reached the end of his route.

Jim Carpenter, the man who handled the ribbons, knew all this, and wasted no time in foolishness. He kicked over the brake with his foot, and held it hard down, while he gave a long, steady pull, that brought his steeds up standing.

At the same time, from a little gulch in the side of the pass, there rode out half a dozen masked men, with weapons in hand, covering the windows of the coach, while a stern voice, from the middle of the crowd, gave the orders, that usually met with prompt obedience:

"Open those doors and step down and out, all you passengers, and see that you keep your hands well up. The first show of nonsense will just put that hearse fuller of holes than a skimmer."

As it was to be supposed that such a proceeding would naturally be followed by more or less loss of life it seemed hardly necessary to ask for any further explanation. There was a little buzz inside, a couple of short screams of alarm, a curse or two, and then the door of the coach upon the side nearest to the road-agents was flung open, and the insides tumbled out. Four of them there were, three being men of various ages, and different degrees of prosperity; while the fourth was a woman. She was short of stature, and nimble of step, but whether she was young or old,

handsome or hideous, could not well be told, since she was muffled up most thoroughly in a large water-proof, and thick veil, which was drawn down over her face.

As these stepped out, in various stages of anger or fright, the chief of the road-agents ran his eye over the party, which had been immediately covered by the weapons of his men, and then he turned to the driver:

"How many passengers have you, Jim Carpenter? This don't seem to fill the bill."

"Five, if it please yer honor. Four pilgrims with boots on, an' a shemale angel that got aboard with her father at Hangtown. They're all thar, an' that's ther bull funeral percession. Ef yer don't b'leve me, hyer's ther way bill."

"They are not all here," answered the agent, sternly. "Where is the fourth man? You passengers there, hold your hands up, I say; and step out toward yonder big rock. The first one that drops his fingers will get a dose of blue pills that will settle his hash. And now we'll try and roust out this skip Jack, that's trying to play roots on us."

"Hold on, hold on!" shouted Carpenter, glancing back over his shoulder in surprised alarm. "Don't go to shooting; you might hit some one. He was hyer not more nor a minute ago, right ahind me. He's somewheres round; an' ef yer treat him right he'll come out fur he ain't got a dog-goned cent. I know it, kase he sold Fritz ther ding-dongdest, meanest lookin' cayeuse thet ever walked on three legs, to git ther duckats to chalk him through. Touch him lightly, though, fur he's a tearer when he's riled."

"Where is he, then? We'll waste no time."

"Oh, I'm hyar, you bet," answered a strange voice, that sounded from somewhere in or around the coach. "I'm stayin' hyar, too, till ther fun's over, an' don't you furgit it! Alabaster Jim never 'll budge."

"You're there, are you? Just throw your irons through the window, and then hold yer hands up and come out. Last time of asking. Ready, boys! We'll each of us put a shot or two in, and if that don't bring him we'll have to yank him out."

Now the fact was that Alabaster Jim was not in the coach at all, as the agents would have understood, if they had listened a little more closely to what Carpenter said. Just before the coach halted he had been right behind the driver; but he had both a quick eye and ear besides understanding the disposition of the disciple of Jehu most thoroughly; and having seen the muzzle of a carbine rise from behind a rock, he had flung himself from the top of the stage just before the sharp hail, and the moment it halted he ensconced himself beneath it, and awaited developments. He had no money; but he had a great deal of grit.

Meantime two of the road-agents, with a pistol in each hand, stood covering the little group that had taken the allotted position near the boulder, while the four remaining agents covered the coach and let drive a rattling volley.

But mingled with the report of their weapons was the short, sharp crack of two pistols, and the two men on guard over the passengers fell back, hard hit.

At the moment the fusilade began one of the three passengers had dropped his hands down like lightning, and fired as they came on a level. Up each sleeve had lain a self-cocking derringer, hidden there before he had stepped from the coach; and when, at the first shot, the eyes of the guard had wavered a little, his time had come.

Then, before the smoke had curled away, he dropped the derringers and dragged from the belt around his waist a pair of revolvers, which he aimed full and fair at the as yet unsuspecting road-agents.

"Now, up with *your* hands, Captain Skull! I've got you lined, and the first man that raises a hammer or twists a finger—you die! Men call me Soft Hand, 'round hyer; but I shoot very straight."

"Thet's so, every time; an' hyar's ther horns that'll toot fur ther last judgment afore yer kin wink three wunks."

And from behind the coach stepped Alabaster Jim, with a ready pistol in each hand!

Everything had worked better for the man who was acting in the capacity of body-guard for Mr. Wilkins and his daughter than they had dared to hope for. Up to this minute it had not been certain how Alabaster Jim would act in case of a raid by the agents, since he had nothing to be robbed of, and seemed in such a hurry to get through that it was natural to suppose he would prefer to have the business over as quietly and as quickly as possible. But here he was, on hand, and ready for fight.

The four agents faltered, hesitated, and were in doubt. They knew that an aggressive motion would be pretty certain to end in the death of some of them, and no man knew which ones would fall.

As for the leader, he was not so certain that any one had him lined, though the chances were as good one way as another.

Of course the four could not afford to surrender, since that would mean a rope apiece, and no more stopping stages; but it is more than likely that they would have temporized and opened negotiations to be allowed to march out with side-arms and the honors of war had it not been for a sudden interruption.

The guards that had intercepted Victor Page and his sister, had heard the shots fired, and imagined that there was something wrong. With revolver at a ready one of the two hastened to the turn of the pass, and saw at once the situation.

Instantly he threw up his hand and took steady aim at the stranger from Cinnabar.

The distance was somewhat more than an average pistol-shot, but the agent took his time for it, and he was a very accurate hand at such work, cool and determined also, and full of the idea that everything depended upon him. When he was certain that he had the bronze-bearded man exactly where he wanted him—and that did not take very long—he fired.

It would have been better for him, perhaps, if he had taken the risk and pulled sooner, for just then the insurance man caught sight of him, and saw his intention; saw, too, that the bullet was going to come straight for him, and down he went as two sharp reports echoed in the pass.

Only Soft Hand had changed his aim with marvelous quickness, firing as he fell, and over his head went the ball of the road-agent, while the latter dropped his weapon, staggered half-way around and collapsed in a senseless heap, with a big round hole in his forehead. At the same time there was a hoarse cry from behind Soft Hand; and from his place at the back of the stage Alabaster Jim opened fire, while the stranger from Cinnabar, still extended upon the ground, raised his deadly tubes, and was at work.

Two more of the road-agents pitched heavily to the ground, and the remaining two did not tarry. Loosing their horses' heads, and plunging their spurs deep in their sides, they darted away; and as they went suddenly swung sideways, bending down, Indian fashion, out of sight, just in time to escape two bullets that went whistling by right where their backs should have been.

Result: four dead agents, and one badly wounded; and behind Soft Hand, gasping, with a wound in his breast, Harold Wilkins, with Kate bending over him, trying with her handkerchief to stanch the blood that was slowly oozing out.

Around the bend the two horsemen vanished like a flash, and Alabaster Jim, who saw the possibility of their making a stand from the cover of that spot picking off the group of passengers, hastily charged after them, but by the time he caught sight of them again they were out of reach of his pistols. He saw, too, that there had in some way been an addition to their numbers, for he counted five riders plunging away into the shadows of the coming evening.

He looked again.

One of the equestrians was a woman; and she seemed under duress, for immediately behind her rode one of the masked men, with a revolver held threateningly at her back. He gazed after them with a puzzled look until they again vanished from sight, then he turned to see what was the state of affairs nearer at hand. He strode up to Wilkins and looked at him with a critical eye. Cinnabar Charley had torn aside his clothing and was examining the wound with deft fingers. He looked up at Jim and said inquiringly:

"He'll pull through?"

"You bet he'll pull through. It's just gouged a rib out. He wants to get back to headquarters, though. Jounce him around in that hearse fur a day er so and he'd peter out, sure. Don't take on so, miss; it's no good ter spile yer eyes, fer ef ther fever sets in they'll be sore enough watchin' ov him. Hyer's one ov them agents' mustangs cavortin' 'round loose, an' I'll mount him and ride back to hunt up sumthin' to tot him to camp on. He can't walk, an' it won't do him much good to strap him into the saddle."

"Now, see hyer," interposed Jim Carpenter, the driver, who had been ascertaining the amount of damage done to his vehicle, and had now resumed his seat, and gathered up the lines.

"This amburlance can't lose no more time, an' them as is goin' along hed better climb right in. Ez fur that man that's plugged, you'd better git him under kiver afore it gits much colder. Thar's a leetle ranch down in Red Cat gulch, below whar she takes off ther road, two mile back, an' mebbe yer could tote him that far."

"Who runs it?" asked Soft Hand, sharply.

"Irish Molly, ef yer knows her. All aboard!"

But one passenger climbed back. He had nothing to lose, and didn't much believe that the road-agents would make another attack on the stage, though it had to follow the route taken by them in their retreat. He was willing to risk it anyhow.

Carpenter drew up his reins, cracked his whip, and away rolled the stage, with its silent passenger.

Meantime Alabaster Jim had discovered that one of the outlaws was only badly wounded, and that if he had had the nerve to do it, he might have made things extremely sultry. To guard against such a contingency, while Soft Hand discussed with Kate a return to Red Cat gulch, he took away his weapons, and bound up his shoulder where it had been fractured by a ball that went through the bone. Then he tore the mask from his face, and shook his head as he saw that the man was only an ordinary looking villain, who glared at him with a snarl on his lips, and a wild, hunted look in his eyes, like a cornered wolf.

"Don't snap at me, my angel friend; I'm not goin' to hurt you, an' ef you don't cut up rough I think ov turnin' you loose to keep up ther breed, but I want to get answer to a couple questions fust. You b'long to Captain Skull's band?"

It was hardly worth while to hesitate. No answer that he could make would render his case any more desperate. The man nodded.

"Then which of these galoots is him?"

"None," answered the man, huskily, licking his dry lips with his hot tongue.

"Don't try to play it on me like that. I'm sure I salted the boss of the gang; but when he tumbled the corpses got kind of mixed."

"The captain was not with us. He picked the job out, and then left us to do the work. The man that did the talking was only a lieutenant."

"Reckon you must have a reg'lar fort, and army, with your captains and lieutenants, and all that. Tell us all about it, can't you?"

"No, I can't. I may as well be hung here right now. Sooner or later Captain Skull would find out about it, and then I'd have to pass my chips straight in. I'd better be dead, than have him looking for me the way he looks when any one goes back on him."

"That's so. Now s'pose I let you go, are you goin' to be huntin' me?"

"I swear not. Never, never!"

"Well then crawl up on a hoss an' git. I swear I ain't huntin' road-agents, an' ef they get you in at the camp they'll hang you. I hate a rope; cuss me ef I don't. So long."

The outlaw, who was, from his features evidently a Mexican, needed no second bidding. Weak though he was the prospect of escape nerved him to exertion. Alabaster Jim in fact helped him off while the attention of the others was diverted, and with a look as near to one of gratitude as his features were capable of assuming he went his way unquestioned, riding his own horse, which had never moved from the spot on which it was standing when the outlaw fell.

Having done this much in the good Samaritan line Alabaster Jim again joined the others, and the decision having been reached to try Irish Molly's ranch, though who she might be

CHAPTER VII.

THE BACK TRACK.

It was a complete surprise, for though the agents were four against two those two were not only dead shots, but they held the drop.

no one knew, an immediate movement was made.

There were still two of the road-agents' horses within reach, and one of these the man from Cinnabar mounted, while Kate was placed on the other, and Alabaster Jim strode on by her side. Contrary to his usual habit he was silent enough now. Perhaps he was considering that for a man anxious to get ahead he had very foolishly thrown away his chances for a speedy departure. If such was his thought he was not greatly mistaken.

CHAPTER VIII.

SWORN TO REVENGE.

ALABASTER JIM had not deemed it necessary, at the time at least, to say anything in regard to that last view he had of the road-agents. Even if he had done so it would not have been likely to have made any difference, for Soft Hand was abundantly occupied with his patron; and he was not going to charge after the road-agents single-handed. Apt as he was at being drawn into frays he was not fond enough of danger to risk that.

So the road-agents, in their retreat, swept up Victor and Varna Page, and carried them off in a mad gallop at the muzzles of their cocked revolvers. Just what was to happen neither of them could guess, but they were cool enough and wise enough to reserve desperate, unavailing resistance until the last moment.

When they had gone some distance the band turned shortly off to the left and pursued a narrow, precipitous, upward path that brother and sister had not noticed as they cantered along the main road a short time before. Even if they had they never would have suspected that a horse could be driven up the ascent at the speed with which they now pushed on.

Once or twice Victor attempted to ask a question, but each time he was sternly ordered to hold his tongue, and he felt that with him at least there would be no trifling. Varna, meantime, said nothing; the quiet nerve with which she accepted the situation was something wonderful, and if it had not been too dark she might have noticed upon the faces, from which the masks had now been withdrawn, looks of admiration; for these were men who could appreciate courage if they knew nothing of any other good quality.

For ten or fifteen minutes the little party wound in and out along the narrow trail, until, at last, there came a hoarse challenge.

A halt was instantly made, and the leading outlaw dismounting pushed on by himself and on foot.

He did not have far to go. Before long they heard him in conversation with the owner of the hoarse voice; and what he said was received in no very good part.

"Failed, have you?" growled the man beyond, in a strange, indistinct tone. "Four dead, sure? Curses on it, what sort of bungling cowards have you got to be when it takes the whole gang to go through a stage? Devils, were they? Of course they were but you knew that; why did you let them get the drop on you? Oh, perdition seize it; why was Manuel not here?"

The answer, given in a lower tone, was not audible, but soon the hoarse voice broke in again:

"Two prisoners have you? What in the name of Satan did you bring them here for? When you had lightened their pockets why did you not let them go, or cut their throats? which, it would have made very little difference."

"We came so quickly, to bring the news that we had not time. Besides, as one of them was a woman we thought perhaps you would have a sight of them. We took them in the bend of the canyon, just this side of where we stopped the coach."

"Ah, a woman! We want no women here; unless it should turn out—but no, they would scarcely think of that game. Bring them here; if they are worthless throw them into the Devil's Bowl and have done with them. We've more women now than the place can hold."

This was what Varna heard just before she was introduced into the presence of the man who, she doubted not, was the famous Captain Skull of whom she had already heard more than one terrific story.

Yet she neither trembled nor quailed when she and Victor were led into his presence.

Whatever the man might be when viewed

by daylight and not in disguise, just now there was hardly a feature about him that could be recognized again, for a bright-red blanket was drawn over his shoulders, his face was muffled by a scarf that was wrapped 'round and 'round his neck, while a broad-brimmed sombrero was drawn low down over his brow. He gave a glance at Victor, and then turned rudely to Varna.

"How much can you pay for your life and that of your brother, my lady?"

"You are quick at conclusions; how know you that he is my brother?"

"He would be blind enough who did not see that; answer my question."

"Nothing, then."

"A pity, too; for unprofitable people meet short shrift here. They die."

"Kill us. It is not so much worse to die than to live."

"Oh, ho! You have money, then. People that talk that way always have. It's only your poor devils, that are trying to fight starvation with honesty, who hang on to life with such a tight grip. If we turn your pockets inside out maybe we can find a ransom."

"Not a dozen dollars. You are welcome to them."

"Keep them. You might starve where you are going."

"Where?"

"Down into the Devil's Bowl."

"Hardly. If that is the kind of place I think it is, we will die when we reach the bottom."

"Woman, you are strangely bold. Who are you?"

"An avenger."

"Whom do you seek?"

"That is, our secret. One who has wronged me and mine deeply."

"A man?"

"Yes, a man."

"And where do you expect to find him?"

"I do not know, I am in search. Perhaps at Tierra Roxo. I have heard that he was striking thither."

"And his name?"

For an instant the woman was silent. With this hoarse voiced, cruel outlaw, so picturesque looking as seen by the flickering flame of a feeble fire, she was strangely confidential. Perhaps it was the magnetism of a somewhat kindred nature that drew her out; perhaps because she felt near to death she was careless of her words.

But this question made her pause; and in the silence Captain Skull gave the fire a rousing kick, and then stared steadily in her face.

Instead of disconcerting her the act seemed to give her a strange courage. Without hesitation she broke out:

"Give me your promise that if I escape your hands it shall forever be a secret, and I will tell you."

"You have it. By the heavens, you are a woman after my own heart!"

"His name is Pierre Redette."

"Pierre Redette! In Satan's name, go, then; and if you find him, kill him! I'll turn you both loose. Is your brother as fierce a tiger as yourself? If he is, it might be worth while to come to some terms. You would make worthy assistants; and there is both pleasure and profit in the life we lead here."

Varna smiled scornfully at the proposition.

"One who would play for millions would scarcely stoop to the petty rewards of even successful brigandage. But tell me: do you know the man I name?"

"Perhaps; that is nothing to you. I tell you to go and seek him. I will do more. There are certain men about Hangtown that, at a word or token from me will aid you in your search. They are devils, I tell you, and will stop at nothing. Do you need them?"

"In your own words, perhaps. Name them. If they serve me they will be well paid."

"See what a good thing a little ill-luck has brought you. From Kansas to California no man could have pointed you out such a tool as Pedro Mercado. Find him, give him a sign that I will give you, pay him well, and he will serve you in anything. Stay here until morning, and I will give you a guide that will put you on the trail, or, if you choose, you may start at once, though that would be a mistake. Only, swear that when you find this Pierre Redette you will show him no mercy."

"I swear!"

She held up her hand, and the two words

dropped from her lips with all the solemnity of an oath.

"Swear on this."

From under the crimson blanket that was wrapped around him he stretched out a hand, and it held by the blade a gleaming knife with a handle like a cross.

From his hand she caught it and kissed it twice.

"By cross and blade, by church and border oath, I swear to show him no mercy! I hate him to the death!"

"I can say no more now, I have said too much already; but in the morning I will launch you on your work. Yonder are a couple of blankets. The bed is none of the softest; but those who sleep the sleep of the righteous need not mind that."

He ceased speaking, and with a mocking laugh withdrew, leaving them actually and positively alone.

And thus it happened that the two reached Tierra Roxo quite late the following morning, and found that the story of the outlaw defeat of the previous night had reached the place long before them.

CHAPTER IX.

IRISH MOLLY'S RANCH.

HAROLD WILKINS, rested limply in the arms of his ally. Every step seemed to give him more or less pain, and though the bleeding had been stanch, and no necessarily vital point had been reached, the feebleness of his former weak condition returned, and it seemed to Kate, every moment, that he must die.

She made no moan over the prospect, for she was a girl that had more nerve and courage than one would suspect, looking at her petite form and fair, young face, but she eyed her father, anxiously, asked a loving question now and then, and waited impatiently for Red Cat Gulch, toward which their progress seemed painfully slow. Around them the shadows deepened, and nothing could be heard but an occasional moan from the wounded man, and the measured tread of the horses.

Alabaster Jim, having some doubts about the trail, went on ahead, and in the end it saved time, for he went backward and forward over the spot several times before he was certain that he had found the faint traces of a path that turned down one of several of the gulches that led away from the main road. When the others caught up with him he led the way down carefully, holding Kate's horse by the bridle, until at last, in a little dingle, the barking of dogs told them that they were near to a habitation of some kind. A careful inspection showed them a long, low cabin against the side of the hill, and almost hidden by its shadow. While they looked, there was a faint gleam of light, showing that some one was within.

Up to the door went the party, and Alabaster Jim gave, on its rough slabs, several resounding thumps, which were answered by the sudden opening of a little shutter immediately above. Immediately afterward, they could hear the clicks of two pistol locks, as the hammers were forced back, and then the tones of a voice that evidently belonged to a female, coarse though they were:

"Arrah, now, go 'way wid yez, ye thaving spalpeens! It's cowl lead an' plinty av it ye'll be afther gettin', if yez bothers Irish Molly. Sure I'm good for any four av ye; an' yez wouldn't harm a lone woman. If it's mate and drink, an' lodgin's yer afther, go on wid yez. Sure it's on'y a trifle av a few miles to the town."

"Easy, easy; good Lord! Yer tongue goes along like water in a flume, an' wouldn't think o' stoppin' till you went over ther dam. Listen till yer hear what's wanted an' see if you won't do a good turn an' put money in yer pocket. Hyer's a man half dead, been plugged by road-agents, an' can't go a step furdur. He'll pay well if you'll let him an' his darter in fur ther night."

"Oh, do," broke in Kate. "Hurry, open the door! Any place will do. See! He may be dying now; and we are no beggars. We will pay you a hundred times over for your goodness."

The soft, pleading voice of Kate, who had sprung lightly down from her horse, had an instant effect.

"Bliss yer swate tongue, it's an honest gurrl yez are, an' it's in ye come. Wait a minute till oi make the door open."

The shutter closed, but almost immediately Irish Molly appeared below.

She was a tall, stoutly built woman, dressed in rather a nondescript costume, and around her waist was strapped a belt in which hung a brace of revolvers, but she looked with rather a kindly blue eye upon the girl, who stepped quickly in, followed by Soft Hand, who carried Harold Wilkins in his arms as easily as though he was a child.

"Lay him on the bed, jintly. He looks most redly for a wake, but don't be frightened, darlint, avick! we'll make a new mon av him, praise the Virgin."

Alabaster Jim halted on the threshold, and peered curiously around the room.

It was lighted by a single candle, and was long and narrow. In one corner, where the rays of the candle fell the brightest, was a low couch, and upon this the man from Cinnabar laid his burden softly down. Away on the opposite side of the room, where the shadows were deepest, it seemed to him that he could make out the outlines of a human figure, silent, motionless, and yet living.

Who was it, and why lurking there? He gave a step within the room; and at the same time the figure moved forward toward him, and he saw that it belonged to a woman. No man had that light, pantherish step combined with that graceful, airy movement.

Right in front of him this woman halted, and gazed upon him with a searching look, which he returned with interest, for she scarcely was the kind of person that he expected to find in Irish Molly's ranch.

She seemed to be about twenty years of age, and was clad in a suit of loosely fitting black velvet, while her small, slender feet were cased in neatly-fitting, light boots. Pushed back from her face was a broad-brimmed black sombrero, over the rim of which trailed away a long feather of the same color. Her eyes were large and black, her features rarely well cut, and over her shoulders, in a great, unconfined wave, fell a mass of raven hair.

To Alabaster Jim she spoke shortly, and yet with a pleasant voice, nodding toward the little group at the couch.

"What means this? Did you say yonder man had fallen at the hands of Captain Skull's men?"

"That's the size of the yarn, miss, an' I guess you'll find it a true bill."

"And how does it come that he seems dying, while the rest of you are unhurt?"

"That's the chances, miss. One of the boys had my pard, over yonder—leastwise, he's a pard with the pistols, fer outside ov his shootin' I don't know him wuth a cent—lined, an' he played the drop game, fer he knows all ther dodges ez good ez ef I'd taught him myself, fer I'm no slouch ef I do blow my own horn. So ther blue pill went on, an' dosed old man Wilkins, who didn't know no better then to be standin' in ther road, an' that opened ther ball. Then we sailed in, a hundred an' fifty pounds to ther square inch, an' ther way we hustled out them agents war three cautions an' a half. At least three ov 'em is layin' up there yit, one ov 'em staid awhile fer a talk, an' ther rest got away. I'm lightnin' on ther shoot, but natur'ly ain't bloodthirsty, so I let 'em go."

"And you two got away with the agents; something that no one else has done?"

"That's ther bill; large type, an' red letters."

"It seems strange; men that act seldom talk so much. Are you certain that you are acting honestly by yonder man, who seems scarcely able to pick and choose for himself? You look more like a road-agent yourself. You are no honest miner."

Alabaster Jim gave utterance to a frank, hearty laugh.

"Oh, I'm talking fur two, that's all, my pardner never opens his mouth except fur rocks, so I hev to keep ther mill stream runnin'. I'm sorry yer don't like my fizzlygony fur it's ther best I've got, and I'd a heap sooner ner not be yer friend. I'm a good man to tie to, leetle pard, fur Alabaster Jim comes to stay when he once hitches on."

"Thanks, but my friends are few. Irish Molly is one—she once saved my life—but I hardly think I need you, though who knows! I've a presentiment I shall see more of those people over yonder, and perhaps of you. Stand aside; I am no longer wanted here."

Alabaster Jim drew respectfully to one side; but before going the girl stepped forward and for one moment gazed fixedly at the

wounded man, and the two forms hanging over him. Then she turned, passed out and soon the steps of her galloping steed were audible, as, at full speed, she sought the trail that passed the Red Cat Gulch.

A few minutes later Alabaster Jim, having taken a look at the wounded man, and held a short conference, also took his departure, but when he reached the main road he turned to the left sharply, and made his way to the camp which he had left but a few hours before.

CHAPTER X. INTO AN AMBUSH.

"HELLO, pard, how's the old man gittin'? Ef you'll take a fool's advice you'll git him out o' thar ez quick ez he'll do to move, ef not quicker, an' keep a handsome look-out fur yerself. I wouldn't be surprised ef they was reachin' fur ye now."

"Who?" was the terse answer.

The speakers were Alabaster Jim and the stranger from Cinnabar. It was several evenings after the swoop of the road-agents, and as the latter came galloping into the town the former strutted out of the Star of Empire, looking on very good terms with himself and the rest of the world. He was, indeed, a prosperous man, for he had been fortunate enough to sell his captured horse to a party that was leaving southward, and a fair run of luck at cards had set him quite on his feet.

"Oh, I'll never tell; but a nod orter be ez good ez a wink. Agents mebbe; some'n else jist ez likely. But how about ther old man?"

"Better. I'll bring him through."

"And hev yer seen anything ov ther black-eyed spitfire ag'in? Who is she? Ef she's round ther ranch much I wouldn't mind comin' out, jist to see them peepers sparkle; but from the way she looked when she left I suggest she's on'y part o' ther floatin' population."

The other shook his head with a nod that might mean half a dozen things.

"Oh, dog-gone it, ye'r a sport, I know; but ye'r a mighty silent one. Hev'n't yer nothin' to say?"

"Not much—put it there, pard, and then I'll move on. I've got to see Mitchell, of the Angels, and I'm in a desperate hurry."

He held out his hand questioningly, and Jim responded by placing his own on it with a resounding smack.

"Thar it ar! I'm a rough an' a tough, but I'm a good one to tie to, an' don't you furgit it. I'm stirrin' 'em up hyer, an' thar's a chance fur lots ov fun ef you've got ther nerve; but, say, you look out fur a Mexican monte-dealer, Pedro Mercado, that runs things hyer sometimes. He's a b-a ad man, an' some day he'll be layin' fur ye."

"I'm looking! So long!"

"Yes, ye'r lookin'," muttered Jim to himself, "an' if ye'r satisfied with that why should I bu'st myself tryin' to tell yer somethin' mebbe I only dreamed; but I'll be 'round, allee samee. Thar's more money in this place, an' Alabaster Jim's goin' fur it. Ef he'd only buckle right down to work what stunnin' pards we'd make!"

At the thought of so much lost opportunity the sport sighed softly, and made his way toward Hoodlum Hall, where, despite an occasional black look, he was as much at home as any of them.

Of course his return to the camp had elicited some comment, but he had held his peace until the rumor got abroad that the coach on which he had gone out had been stopped by agents. Then they interviewed him in regard to the affair, and he gave an account that was built with a solid corner stone of truth, but the balance of the foundation was so large that it was hard to find it.

When asked what had become of the coach his answer was that it had gone on; and to a further question whether the rest of the passengers had gone with it he responded that they could not prove it by him, as he ran his own vehicle and the balance of the world might walk for all he cared. He thought to himself that it might be as well to say nothing of the trio he had left at Irish Molly's; and he was disgusted with Soft Hand for venturing into town, and so running the risk of being followed back. For the sake of Wilkins and his daughter it would have been better to have remained hidden.

As he went along he was revolving these matters in his mind, and as a result, to carry out certain trains of thought, he did not turn

into the Hall, but went by it, and wandered a little down the gulch. When he came back he had a glimpse of a boyish figure that shot in through a side door.

He halted and slapped the brim of his hat until it stood straight back from his brow. There was something familiar about the figure and he wondered what it was doing there. Instead of entering, as he had intended, he lounged about, waiting until the suppositious boy should reappear. He did not believe it was a boy at all. He believed it was the girl that he had seen at Irish Molly's.

The boy did reappear, followed by a tall, wicked-faced Mexican. At the door they conversed but a minute and then separated; but that minute was sufficient.

"They're after him, sure enough, an' little Black Eyes has gone back on him. My ears an' eyes kin beat any such game, every time. Ther little girl's goin' out ov town an' there's no use to follow her; but we'll see whar Pedro pulls up at."

Carefully he followed the Mexican until finally he saw him halt near the Seven Angels, when he was joined by Victor Page.

The two held a short conference but there was no earthly way of getting within earshot, as he had by the merest chance succeeded in doing once before. He could only guess at what was said, and he saw them part without knowing more of their business than he did before.

"They're wuth ther watchin'?" he thought to himself, "an' I'll keep an eye on 'em. Ef they get away from Alabaster Jim they can call him a hip-shot elephant an' a condemned old scarecrow on wheels."

But watch though he might, that night there was no reward for his vigilance, since Pedro dealt monte for the rest of the evening and the most of the night, as unconcerned as though he had no secret that he was hiding from the world, and Jim heard him say that he intended, the next evening, to start for another mining camp some forty miles away.

At sunrise it was certain that Mercado was sleeping in the little shanty that he called his home; and at sunset it was just as certain that he had disappeared from Tierra Roxo without Alabaster Jim, who was fascinated for the time by a poker table, being any the wiser. The trail was lost; and it proved no easy matter to take it up again; and meantime Pedro was arranging for work.

As Victor Page had announced that he intended to look at the mining features of Tierra Roxo, and had engaged board at the Seven Angels for a week, with a possible extension, he could come and go without question; and he did come and go, but so carefully that no one once suspected that he had any other business than looking at mines, and caring for the health of his sister who had medical advice to live in the open air, and in the saddle.

Only one man kept an eye on him; though fortunately, or unfortunately, just when something of real importance was on the carpet, an interesting game of draw, with a wonderful balance of luck and skill, claimed his attention, and, for the time, he forgot Pedro Mercado, Victor Page, and his suspicions. If he had heard Page's parting words, that he failed to catch, he might have been more on the alert.

"I will be on the watch, and if he comes in the evening we will know what to do. Bring him to the old mission—and alive; you will find us there, and everything must be ready. Do your work with any kind of care and he will never be missed, or asked for, and once I have him safe I care not what becomes of those at the ranch."

So, when Pedro slipped out of town with lasso, revolvers and knife, he was bound for no forty mile trip to the Southern mining camps; but doubled back on his trail, and that night lay in wait, with two men, north of the camp, by the side of the road that ran past the head of Red Cat Gulch.

In the darkness they crouched like three great, human spiders, and in his right hand Pedro held a coiled lasso, a terrible weapon in such a hand as his, for straight around his mark he could fling it, at any reasonable distance, with unerring aim, even in such dim light as that which lay along the road beneath him.

For several hours the three had waited; ever since Soft Hand had dashed by on his way toward town. Well hidden behind the crest of a bank, some fifteen or twenty feet above the

trail, they had lurked in utter loneliness, since not another living soul had passed.

"Curses on the kiote, why does he wait?" muttered the Mexican, tired with the long vigil. "It is getting darker and if I miss my fling there will be work to do for your revolvers."

"Whist! What's that? By the powers, he's coming now!"

One of his companions held up his hand warningly, and all listened.

Sure enough in the distance they heard a galloping horse. Pedro swung the lariat loosely to see that it was ready for use, and the others cocked their pistols softly.

"S'posin' it's not him? S'posin' you yank ther wrong man off, what yer goin' to do about it?" suggested the third man of the party.

Mercado drew the edge of his left hand across his throat, from right to left.

"Turn his pockets out and fling him in the bushes. What business has he riding this trail to night?"

Nearer and nearer came the rider. They could see his form bending forward slightly in the saddle. He rode with a loose rein, and the mustang was going its own gait, a swift gallop.

As he came nearer, Mercado swung his cord around his head to gather momentum, and then, suddenly rising and stepping forward he made his cast at the man directly below him.

Small blame to the man from Cinnabar if, taken unawares, there was no resistance made.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as the noose settled around him.

Then with a heavy crash he fell head-first from his saddle to the ground, and lay motionless, while the mustang, free of its burden and wild with terror, darted into the night at a racing run.

"We have him; now for the mission and the gold!"

And Pedro, followed by his companions leaped down the bank, and ran to the side of the inanimate man.

CHAPTER XI.

YOU MUST DIE.

WHEN Soft Hand had fairly recovered his senses he found himself propped up against what seemed to be the wall of a cellar, and bound hand and foot. A lantern cast rather a feeble light on the scene; and directly facing him was a man who held, pointed at him, a cocked revolver, and who now, seeing that he was conscious, growled out the words:

"You must die!"

"Ah, indeed! Why?"

The threat was savage; the answer was too careless to be defiant.

"You ask that question? Surely you know me?"

"By sight and hearsay simply. Some one told me you were Victor Page."

"Yes. I am the brother of Allan Page."

"Ah! I didn't know there was such a man as Allan Page, though somehow the name seems familiar."

"Wretch! Dare you flout me in that way? There lives no such man now because you killed him."

"If Oh, you must be mistaken. I don't remember anything about it if I did; and my record's not such a long one that I could have forgotten him. No! I don't think I did. I shot a man named Payne at Alamosa, once. Really, that is the nearest that I ever came to it."

"Oh, I did not think you were so cowardly as to attempt to escape my just vengeance by a lie!"

"Hold on, hold on! I'm not trying to escape. That's not my word. When they double bank I sometimes 'retire.' I'm willing to do that now. All the same I know of no reason why you should be hungering for my blood. If you were why didn't you call up and settle? I was always ready."

"I tell you you slew him cruelly, treacherously, wantonly, when he was your guest, when he had confided his life and safety to your hands. You turned him adrift in an open boat, without mast, sail, or provisions. His shriveled corpse was found on the beach, five hundred miles from where you began your murder."

"That was a rough sort of a journey for him to take; I don't wonder he was wilted before he got to the shore. A cruel sort of a

man I must be; so, if you mean business, I suppose you may as well go on with the circus."

"Do not be impatient. I have yet another witness against you. Varna, stand forth!"

At the call a female figure glided from the shadow of a doorway, and stood facing the bound man.

"Pierre Redette, you know me."

She was a wonderfully handsome woman, this velvet clad beauty that stood there, with a cruel smile on her full lips, and her dark eyes sending a stream of hatred straight to those of the prisoner. There was a broad, low brow, lined by delicately curved eyebrows; there was a face whose every feature seemed most truly regular, and whose complexion, olive and peach, had only been heightened in beauty by sun and wind; there was a form, just a little over the medium height, that was rounded out with the most faultless curves, and the hand that she raised was long, slender, and altogether shapely.

For an instant the captive did not answer; and as she watched his soft gray eyes she saw them actually glow with a flash of admiration. When he answered, however, it was in the same careless tone in which he had spoken before:

"Excuse me, miss, but though it's bad manners to contradict a lady, you're twice mistaken. I'm not Pierre Redette, and I don't know you. Unless—"

He stopped suddenly, and looked at her steadily, with a gaze of calm curiosity.

"Unless?"

"You might be Sapphira. I've heard of her." The black eyes flamed with sudden fury.

"Villain, would you flout me? I am Varna Page that was; I am Varna Redette that is. I am your wife—deeply wronged, grievously slighted, and now come to take vengeance. It was for the sake of that yellow-haired siren, whose name was too soiled then to pass my lips now, that you slew my brother. Oh! a woman's revenge for slight and scorn may come slow; but it is sure and terrible at the last. If she lives doubt not that I will find her, vain though the search may so far have been; and as you die the lingering death to which we have decreed you, you can console yourself with the thought that she too shall suffer."

"Excuse me, madam, if madam it is; but I'm not Pierre Redette. It's true I had some other name long ago, so long that I forget whether it was Tom, Dick or Harry, but at present they call me Soft Hand. I'm sure I never would have had the bad taste to run after any yellow-haired siren if I had been blessed with a handsome, amiable spouse like yourself; so you see it's all a mistake. At the same time I never want to spoil sport, and I'm not very fond of living anyhow. That last is the reason, I suppose, that I've always pulled through with all the advantages against me. Maybe if I die, the real, out-and-out Pierre Redette will be all the happier for it. It's a little awkward, this being trussed up here, and I know I don't show off to good advantage, but I hope, in the future, you'll remember me a little kindly, as a man that died cheerfully for your accommodation, and if you ever find out your mistake don't worry. I've had an unpleasant life so far, and really you are doing me a favor. I reckon there's some money in this, too, somewhere. There generally is. If so, and you can spare the stamps, I wish you'd put up a stone slab, with a silver plate on it, and on the plate, 'Soft Hand, aged 28. He was a competent man.' You see I've been a competent man all the time, but the world wouldn't have me at any price. That's all now; drive on with the hearse."

Even the woman, with all her hate, was puzzled at the soft, even, utterly unconcerned manner of the man, whose eyes were fixed upon her in regret rather than anger, as he made this, for him, wonderfully long speech.

But Victor Page, who had drawn a little to one side, and had been studying the almost colorless face of him he called Redette, dashed forward at this, his eyes sparkling with wrath.

"Would you allow his glib tongue once more to deceive you? Here, look! By this sign I knew him."

As he spoke he tore open the clothing of Soft Hand at the breast, and disclosed upon his bosom a broad blue circle, tattooed upon the flesh, in the center of which was a red heart, and a hand.

"Did I not tell you that he had the mark upon his breast? I had sharp eyes to watch

him, and while he slept, at the risk of life to examine him. After that there could be no more doubt. We laid in wait for him. As he passed, a lasso dragged him from his horse and threw him senseless to the ground. Then he was bound and brought hither. He knows now to whom he is indebted for this tardy vengeance, and it is useless longer to delay. Watch him and you will not doubt. There is the same covert sneer on that accursed mouth that we knew so well."

As he ceased speaking Page clapped his hands.

A moment after two men came slowly into the vault, almost staggering under the weight of a long, narrow, heavy box.

With them came a third, carrying a second lantern.

Soft Hand gave a lightning glance at the three; but little use was it if he hoped to recognize their features. Each had his head enveloped in a piece of black crape. The same material was twisted around their hands, while a single garment of white reached from neck to foot. Thoroughly masked, were they; and not a word did they speak as they placed the box upon the stone floor, and removed the lid.

Then Victor Page motioned toward Soft Hand, and with his three masked satellites approached him, raised him from his feet, placed him in the box, and hastily fitting the lid upon it, began, with a hammer that they had brought in the box, to spike it home with heavy nails.

"Thump! thump! thump!" The blows sounded hollowly, the man with the hammer worked with nervous haste, Varna stood with face deathly white holding the lantern high above her head; and from within the box there came no sound of curse or prayers. Soft Hand was game to the last.

CHAPTER XII.

ALABASTER JIM TAKES UP A CLAIM.

PERHAPS two dozen nails held the lid tightly in place; but the man within was not entirely cut off from outside air, since, in the foot of the box, there were several auger holes. He was not in immediate danger of suffocation.

The work thus far done to their satisfaction the five stood for a moment in silence. Their task was not yet completed; and what really seemed the hardest, most cruel part of it was to be done.

Yet Victor Page gave no signs of relenting, nor repugnance. To one side of the box he stepped, and motioned to his men, who each took one of the three remaining corners, and lifting the coffin, with its living contents, they followed Varna, who passed out through the door by which the box had been brought.

Through another room, or cellar they went, and came to a third, if anything damper than the others. In one corner was a heap of stones, and some freshly dug earth, beside which was an opening.

Without more ado the box was lowered into this shallow grave, the dirt was carefully filled in so that the air was not altogether excluded from the one end of the box, and then the stone flagging was relaid, and the floor brushed over. The sharpest of eyes could scarcely have discovered that there had been any recent tampering with the floor.

Victor Page swung the lantern over the spot once or twice, and seeming to be satisfied, uttered the one word:

"Come!"

Silently by his side walked his sister; behind him the three men, who, when they had come to the first room, stripped off their disguises, and flung them into one corner. Then all ascended the stone stairway, and stood in the doorway of the deserted, ruined old mission house.

"You have done so far your share of the work well. I know you and can trust you. You know me, and must. Here is the sum that I promised down; if in three days I find all well the rest will be given to you. Meantime one of you must keep an eye on the spot all the time, to see that no one enters without our knowledge. There are three of you, you can divide the watches so that it will be no great task. If you need me you can find me at the Angels. Pedro, come with me a moment, I can give you your orders as I go along."

Into the outstretched hand of each he dropped a small but heavy bag, and then turned away, Pedro following as he was bidden.

When they had gone perhaps twenty yards Victor turned to the ruffian by his side.

"Pedro, I know and trust you; but how about the others? Are they safe?"

"There is a risk, thousand fiends! there is a risk. They are devils to fight and drink and gamble, and care for nothing; but some day they may get cut down, and then, when they are dying, they will tell all. That is the danger."

"They have been well paid; in their pockets there is already a small fortune. Perhaps, however, you can lighten them of some of that. I wish it could all have gone to you. Can you not try their skill at monte?"

"No cards with them for me. They would work together, for they are both Americanos, and I would lose every dollar."

"It is a pity. Besides what they have there is another thousand more for them when the third day is over."

The Mexican gave a shiver; and yet probably he did not know it. Spite of himself there was something too awful about what was to happen between now and the third day.

"Yes," continued Page. "Three thousand dollars is a fortune for one man. Among three it does not go far. When I had it all I thought I was rich. Oh, well; I will have a hundred or two with which to reach Frisco, and there I will go to work to make more. Revenge satisfied, labor comes easy."

Page talked as though for himself. Even keen-witted Pedro did not see that temptation was deliberately thrust upon him. One thousand dollars had seemed to him a large sum; but now he yearned after the three. In a voice that quivered a little he asked:

"The rest of the three thousand is not for the work, but the secret. If anything should happen to the Americans, and I should hold the secret alone, would it not be worth just as much for me to keep it, as for three?"

"Yes, yes," hastily answered Victor. "But what can happen to them within three days? We will talk no more of it. Be watchful and if anything happens let me know. At the end of three days come singly to the gulch near the Angels and receive your reward. Now go back, for it is time that Varna and I were gone."

The two separated, and Victor went on to join his sister, who had gone on and left them alone together.

They were brave after a sort, these three villains, for in spite of the fearful deed in the cellar the ruined mission seemed to have no terrors for them. On guard they remained careless, reckless, only intent upon whiling away their three days' probation. They had a sufficiency of coarse fare to sustain life, and they washed it down with water from a spring, and copious draughts of whisky from their full store. Pedro, at last, even forgot his scruples about cards and joined in a game that speedily became interesting.

It was the evening of the third day that Victor Page waited, according to agreement, in the little gorge a quarter of a mile from the Angels. In the interim he had taken life coolly, and not a soul of those who looked on him could have told from his face the desperate game he was playing, yet the most trying time of all was the half-hour he waited here, alone in the shadows.

Pedro came at last, and as Victor caught sight of him an evil smile curved his lips, for he felt sure that the seed he had sown had produced good fruit.

"I am here," whispered Pedro.

"I see. And the others?"

"It was a chance. We played cards. They cheated. I had my pistols ready and shot them both. Then I left the cards between them, and the stakes, and in the pocket of each a few dollars, and came away. This is what is left of them. I claim the full reward, for the secret is mine alone."

He stretched out his hands; and they supported no light weight, for he held the three money-bags that had been the first installment paid on the crime.

"It seems hard, but I suppose it could not be helped. It was your life or theirs. I will keep my word with you—but if they come back it will not be well for you."

"When they come back it will be just ahead of the fire. I'm off now, but when you've another job on hand call for Pedro Mercado and you will find him around."

Formal leave-taking between these two would have been a mockery. The Mexican received

the wages of his guilt without so much as a thank you, and turned away, while Victor Page went back to the Angels. This wild region needed him no longer, and on the morrow he and Varna must leave, to work out other plots and other plans.

As the Mexican went away he chuckled to himself.

"Ha, ha! Three thousand dollars have I easily earned; and the best of it is that it will not stop there. Victor Page will have millions; and I, Pedro Mercado, bandit and outlaw, will have him for my banker. I will be his leech, to drain him of what will be dearer to him than his blood. He and his proud sister will see me again when their purse has been refilled. I know their secret; and they need not fear that I will not use it well. I know what it is to be haunted, and I will teach them the lesson that I have learned. Pedro, you are a made man."

And just then there came an interruption, too sudden to be even a surprise.

From the bushes at the side of the path which he was following a man stepped out and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"So yer killed 'em, did yer, pard? Yer a noble ole Roman, you be; but, pard, you must make a divy. Three thousand dollars! Why, it'd wear yer out carryin' ov it. Shell out, Pedro, my buck, shell out; an' don't be slow about it."

Pedro turned like lightning, and in his hand flashed a knife. If he had had a little more warning he would have drawn a revolver, which might have been better for him; but, taken unawares, the steel was his instinctive weapon.

"That's it, is it?" said the interloper, coolly. "No noise, no nonsense; an' ther best man wins. One er ther t'other will tote ther hull pile; an' I reckon that'll be me."

"Curses on you, prowling coyote, you know too much. You leave not this spot alive. You would rob me, would you? Well, I will take your life, thou worthless vagabond."

As the Mexican growled out these words he sprung at the other, striking as he came.

But if he thought with one blow to crush the vagabondish-looking man, who had drawn a knife as broad and as keen as his own, he was woefully mistaken. A strong, skillful wrist had the man, and a vastly cooler head. There was the cling-clang of steel meeting steel, as he parried the first thrust, and for the moment stood on the defensive. Then, like a tiger, he began an attack that was short and deadly. Before a minute had elapsed Pedro fell, stricken deftly through the heart, and the victor was kneeling by his side, rifling his pockets. From them he transferred to his own their heavy load of gold, and a package of papers.

"Pedro, you were a rooster; but yer crowed too soon. You've lost yer pards, you've lost yer gold, you've lost yer life; an' Alabaster Jim holds yer secret. Let's see ef he can't work it fur all it's wuth."

CHAPTER XIII.

VICTOR PAGE MAKES A MISTAKE.

TIERRA ROJO was the original name of the mining camp which nestled among the gulches near the old, deserted mission-house of Santa Brigida, but as it was divided up into several sections, with diverse interests, and a preponderance of Americans in its population, it had several other names that were easier of pronunciation, and in the opinion of the miners a good deal more appropriate. Hangtown Bar was one, and it would have stuck, perhaps, had it not been for other Hangtowns of greater age, if not of more present importance, but the name has since been forgotten, though at that time greatly in vogue. It was a place where men attended to their own business, and looked with suspicion upon any one who attempted to interest himself in the affairs of his neighbor. As there was always a large floating population there, that came to-day and left to-morrow, the advent of Victor Page was scarcely noted, and his exodus not likely to attract much attention. He had come ostensibly to look at the camp with an eye to investment, and as he really had a claim to leave behind in the hands of a partner, with whom he had made very liberal arrangements, what could he said?

The Seven Angels, notwithstanding its high sounding title, had rather primitive accommodations, for which a price was asked that at first sight seemed almost exorbitant; but as it was the only house that had much pretension to being really a house, as it had a location that

was at once commanding and convenient, and as the rush to the camp was on, every one paid without grumbling, or went where there were cheaper rates and longer credits.

From his interview with Pedro, Victor Page had come back exultant. His work at Hangtown was finished, and his arrangements to leave were completed, though of course he would not take his departure before the next morning.

His first impulse was to confide his intelligence to Varna. She had a little room adjoining his own, scarcely more than half a dozen feet square. To enter it one passed through a door that led from the hall; but as the partitions were of coarse canvas, which, at one time, had received a coat or two of paint, and as he had already opened communications by means of a slit in the material, made with his bowie knife, Victor entered his own room, for he had something about him which he wished to deposit in his saddle-bags.

He approached the partition, and listened. Beyond he could faintly hear the regular breathing of the occupant of the other room. Softly the breath came and went, as if the person was in a calm and peaceful slumber.

An impatient look overspread his face.

"She sleeps like a child," he muttered. "It is hardly worth while to waken her, and yet I would have liked to have had some talk with her."

The truth was that he was wide awake, and too restless to think of retiring. He looked at his rough bed with a scowl of disgust, and then lighting a cigar, seated himself at the window.

The weed failed to quiet his nerves. He looked down upon the town and hesitated. At times, there came to his ears quite distinctly a burst of music, mingled with a roar of voices. The Star of Empire was in full blast.

He knew nothing of the place but its name and nature, though he could fancy what it was like. A hundred patrons would make a lively little business for it, and of all the miners within supporting distance it was only the few staid, sober ones that did not give it a call on Saturday evening. He had some speaking acquaintances in the camp, and would be likely to meet them there, so, after a momentary hesitation, he girt on his weapons again, and went down.

As he came up to the open door of the Star he saw that there was something unusual in the air. The music had suddenly ceased, the shouts had dropped to an undertone, that was almost a whisper, while the men were gathered around the room in groups, looking from one to another, half suspiciously, half defiantly.

"What's up? what's the go?" asked Victor, somewhat carelessly as he pushed his way into the room.

"That's what's up—bloody murder. That's been too much of that work hyer, an' it's got to be stamped out. Ar' you man enough to help do it?"

The speaker was a rough-looking miner, who seemed to be hot with an honest indignation. As he spoke he pointed to a stiffened corpse, that lay stretched on a table, just where it was deposited unceremoniously by three men, who had stalked in with the body between them.

"I'm always with the friends of law and order," answered Victor, and he glanced at the corpse, certainly without any idea of being able to identify it.

It was something of a shock.

Stretched out there, with glaring eyes, hanging jaw, the life-blood on face and garments, as it had oozed or spurted from half a dozen wounds, was Pedro Mercado.

"Good heavens!" was his instant exclamation at the recognition. Then he as instantly added: "How shocking!"

Nevertheless, a moment later he had not only recovered all his self-possession, but was conscious of something like satisfaction. With Pedro dead the knowledge of his secret would never come to the world, since the last witness was gone.

The last? No, not the last, since Varna still lived. Yet her he could trust, for a time at least, and then— Well, then, Victor Page had always taken care of himself, and always would; but there were reasons, solid and convincing, why she should live; and so far through life the Pages had been very true to each other. Just now, however, there was something more than thought required. The words of the miner had stirred up others, who

looked at him to answer for them as well as for himself.

"It has been murder, most foul. You speak truly. We, here, are the law, and it is time for the law to act. I am ready, and I believe the rest of you are. What can be done? Where is the culprit?"

"He will be taken, never fear. Half a dozen of us were together, striking for the Star, when we came upon the body. Three of us brought it here, while the rest followed off on the trail. He can't escape them, but if they don't come soon more of us must join in the hunt."

"I am ready, for one," answered Victor; and a dozen others chimed in, offering themselves as human sleuth-hounds, to hunt down the murderer.

Nor did they remain inactive long, but sallying forth from the Star, a force of fully a score, under the guidance of the men who had found the corpse, they went straight to the spot where Pedro had fallen, and finding the trail of the three pursuers, followed it straight along a path from which no one seemed to have departed either to the right or to the left.

"Tain't hard to see whar this are goin' to bring out at," whispered the man who walked at the side of Victor Page. "It's bin a cuss ez knows ther ropes 'round heur, but don't 'spect thar's goin' to be ary 'count took ov findin' ther stiff ov a dead Greaser. Won't he jump when he hears ther jedgment horn a-tootin'?"

Page had already begun to look suspiciously around. He did not like the way that he was drifting. He had his suspicions. And there was something weird and horrible in being one of this silent score, that was mercilessly tracking the murderer. If the truth were all known how soon the rest of the pack would turn and rend him. Supposing something should happen that they would learn it! In as low a tone he answered:

"What do you mean? Which way are we going?"

"Ef thar ain't been some mistake we'll fetch up at ther old mission. Ez a jin'ral thing thar's nothin' thar but kiotes an' owls; but now an' then thar's a two-legged wolf slips in ter hide, an' I reckon we'll find one thar to-night. Ef so, Oregon Hank won't be kerryin' that las' rope fur nothin'."

This time Victor shivered in spite of himself, and looked around as though he was the wolf that was being hunted. Of all places the ruined mission was the last that he wished to go to.

But there was no way for him to escape. Mentally he cursed his folly in thrusting himself forward on an expedition which he might have avoided. He never would have been so foolish if the thought had not occurred that some one might have seen him, at some time, conversing with the now defunct Pedro, and attempt to call him to account for not giving some sign. This way he was speaking by his actions. He was in for it now, since chance had thrown him in the center of the crowd. Whatever developments might come he must accept. He felt of his weapons, and nerved himself for the mental strain that he knew must come, and went boldly on.

There was no mistake now about the objective point. The dark outline of the old mission was at last in view.

And just as they came within say two hundred yards of the walls, they heard faint yells and the muffled report of perhaps half a dozen pistol-shots, following each other in rapid succession.

At that the score set up a shout and dashed forward. The game had been run to a hole and had shown fight. They expected to see a perforated ruffian.

But as they entered the building through the gaping door upon the one side, there was a mocking laugh without, followed by the discharge of a revolver, and the sound of a horse, ridden recklessly away.

There would have been an immediate stampede in that direction had it not been that there came almost immediately afterward a howl from somewhere within and below. As a result half a dozen ran aimlessly after the vanishing horseman, while the rest, including Victor Page, plunged down the stone stairway, which led to the cellars.

CHAPTER XIV.

FINDERS ARE NOT ALWAYS KEEPERS. ALABASTER JIM'S LITTLE GAME.

AN undeniable odor of gunpowder pervaded

the stairway, and some one below was shouting vigorously enough to furnish a very good guide to where he lay. Moreover there was a faint glimmer of light almost immediately visible, and among the first Victor Page pushed his way to the spot that he knew only too well, and halted at the doorway.

A lighted lantern illuminated the scene.

Three men were there, in various stages of excitement, and in the corner was a pile of dirt and stones, showing that the grave so carefully covered had in some way been found and torn open.

Half sick, Page leaned against the stone wall. He could not go further; and he dared not flee. He left to others the task of finding out what mystery had been revealed.

The rush of the rest did not cease until every man had passed Victor; and first of all went the man who had appealed to him in the Star of Empire saloon, who gave one amazed glance; for three men laid out was not by any means what he had expected to see.

"Hi, Jack McCaw, what's up? Did yer find him?"

"You bet, an' he war red hot; an' I 'guess are still a-heatin'. I don't want him; you can have him; an' ef that don't suit let him go."

"But how's this? Are you much hurt? An' Tom an' Harry? 'Pears to me they must 'a' double banked yer. How many ov 'em, an' which way did they go?"

"Oh, thar war on'y one of 'em; but he war a bu'ster. By ther jumpin' red-horn rhinos-keros, he plugged the hull three on us."

"Ye'r right he did," interposed Tom Denham, holding up an arm hastily bandaged with a handkerchief. "An' ther wust ov it war we caught him unawar's an' we had our irons all cocked an' ready. 'Surrender!' ses we. Bang, whang, bang! He jist turned at ther word, an' each hand held a six. I dunno who fired first, but I know in about er second we war all salivated. 'You ain't hurt,' sez he, 'but don't try that no more, er next time I'll play fur keeps. Good-night.' With that he war gone. I don't see how you helped meetin' him."

While the redoubtable Tom was speaking, the new-comers were examining the wounded men. It was easily seen that the two who had spoken were only marked with flesh wounds, and it turned out that the third was shot through the hand.

"We may es well see what ther galoot war up to. We mounted him in yonder hole, an' it's my idear thar's sign, thar, ov foul play."

Toward the spot indicated the men crowded; and one, more daring than the rest, leaped into the opening, landing upon the lid of the box that still rested there, though hidden no longer.

"Hold ther lantern hyer a minute. Thar's a box hyer, an' ther cover's split. I reckon I know what I'll find; but I don't want to feel round in ther dark."

As he spoke the man cast out a long strip of the splintered lid, and then held down the light that had been handed to him.

"Sure enough," he continued after a moment's inspection. "It's a stiff. This must be his buryin'-ground. I 'spose he war gittin' a place ready fur ther Greaser. He does biz by the hullsale, mind I tell yer."

"Is he dead?"

"Very dead. Stiffer nor a ramrod."

"Haul him out hyer, an' we'll see what he looks like. Who's missin' from camp? 'Ary galoot hyer got a lost pard?"

Victor Page had stood the inquiry so far; but at the proposal to bring the corpse from its resting-place he could remain no longer. There was a bottom somewhere to his conscienceless soul. Actually sick and white he turned away, and while every one was intent on the expected revelation he made his way out into the open air, and started back toward the Seven Angels. As he went he heard a scattering volley, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, and had little doubt but that the balance of his party had run afoul of the supposed assassin.

He halted a moment and listened.

On the clear night air he could hear the sound of voices, but the words were too indistinct to make them out. As the firing had ceased he had a suspicion that either dead or alive they had their man; and that man he was not anxious to meet, though he wished to see his face.

Perhaps he might have remained and risked recognition; but he feared the thing that had

been unearthed in the cellars of the old mission. He believed that it would be brought to the camp; and if, in its presence any unfortunate charge should be brought against him he doubted if he would be able to retain his coolness. Of course this was only a temporary weakness, so he reasoned, and, perhaps even by the next day-dawn, he would again be all hard and cruel, and void of conscience.

Thinking thus he turned his face campward again and made the best of his way back toward the Angels, cursing himself as he went, that he had been so foolish as to leave the shelter of its hospitable roof, even though, by so doing, he had learned that matters were going on which very nearly concerned himself.

As he neared the limits of the camp there suddenly entered his mind the conviction that he was being followed. He heard no sound, of that he was certain; but all the same he seemed to know by instinct that a pair of ghostly feet were dropping, dropping, dropping behind him.

Furtively he looked over his shoulder, but he saw nothing; and he shuddered for fear, in the future, he was to be subject to such unpleasant tricks of the imagination. As he descended the side of a dark little gulch just out side of the town, he drew his revolver and cocked it, for the idea possessed him more firmly than ever that some one was in pursuit, and very near. Yet, as if ashamed to give way to his fears, he looked steadfastly forward, all the time listening for sounds that he could never distinguish. It was almost a relief when, though still he had heard no sound, some one touched him lightly on the shoulder.

On the instant he wheeled and thrust the muzzle of his pistol straight at the breast of the man he now knew must be behind him, and tugged at the trigger.

But all ready as he was, and confident of the result, he was doomed to disappointment, for the foe, if such he must be called, was as vigilant, as well prepared and as quick as himself. As his revolver came into line the hand that held it was grasped by another hand, and though his finger tightened no report followed. The hammer was held as motionless as though set in a steel vise, by a finger that pressed against it until the muzzle had been thrust upward, so as to point over the assailant's shoulder.

And then Victor Page was aware of the fact that a glittering knife was held over his breast, and that his life was hanging on a slender thread if this man chose to strike.

The man did not so choose, however, but gave utterance to a short, hard laugh.

"Thet's right, Victor, draw it mild! I wouldn't hurt yer fer a thousand—unless I hes to. I jist wanted to say a word er two, an' then you kin toddle on. I don't want ter roust out ther neighbors, an' ef you be wise, you won't want to neither, Victor Page."

"Unhand me, villain," answered Page, in as low a tone as the man had assumed. "If it is robbery that you are after you can get nothing but blood or lead from me. I have not ten dollars on my person. If you are wise you will be off. A score of men are coming this way, and they will make but short work of a foot-pad, who falls into their hands. They are vigilantes from the camp, hungering for blood on account of a murder, which perhaps you have committed. I have but to raise my voice to call them upon you."

"Well, then, I wouldn't let her rise. Don't yer see, you and me is pards, in a sorter way, an' it wouldn't be ther squar' thing to give a man away that sort. I'm not a-robbin' yer; not, at least, just now. I on'y wanted to let yer know I war around, an' war goin' to stay around. Let go ov yer pop-gun an' let's hev a word of sense. Then yer kin git under ther shadder ov ther Seven Angels' wings ez soon ez yer like."

"What are your intentions? To me you are a perfect stranger."

"I won't be long. I'm Alabaster Jim, an' I've picked yer out fur my banker—I'm a leech, an' a screw—I'm a ba-a-d man to handle ef I onst git riled, an' I've got it down on you mighty fine, an' I'm goin' to play it fur all it's wuth."

"In Heaven's name what do you mean? You are surely crazy."

"Not very much, I'm on'y a confidential agent, thet kin keep a secret—ef I'm paid fur it. I know ther hist'ry ov a leetle circus thet kin off in ther cellars ov the old mission three nights ago. I know ther hull story clean

through; an' Mister Page, I'm on ther make. I don't want money now, fur I've got thousands, but I'll be broke soon, dead broke, I feel it in my boots, an' then I'll play you fur rocks, an' yer got to kim down. You hyer me, eh?"

"And do you think you can frighten me by any such trumped-up story as I see you intend to manufacture? A man that can face you without a quiver, in the darkness, with your knife at his breast is scarcely the kind to choose for black-mail."

"My angel pard, yer hes nerve; but when yer know ther drop is on yer you don't squirm. That's ther hull on it. An' when ther's a woman in the case ther's allers a double chance. When ther time comes you'll shell out, er pass in yer checks, an' that handsome sister'll stand er fall with yer. Mebbe I won't see yer ag'in fur a year; mebbe it won't be a fortnight. We can't tell how ther keerds will run; but Alabaster Jim won't lose sight on yer, an' don't yer furgit it. Don't try any tricks now, but hand over that pepper-box an' light out. I mean it."

At the last stern words of command Victor Page relaxed his gripe upon his revolver, which dropped into the hands of Alabaster Jim, who held him covered, as he wheeled and walked rapidly toward the camp.

CHAPTER XV.

ALABASTER JIM "HUMPS HIMSELF," AND CALLS ON A PAIR OF SIXES.

In the shadow of the porch at the Angels stood Victor Page, trembling and uncertain. He found that he was not as great a villain as he had hoped that he was, and his vengeance and his interest alike were overshadowed by other conflicting feelings that had arisen. His crime began to trouble him some, and its consequences more. Although he had been too much interested in his own affairs to pay much attention to what was going on in the camp, he had heard a version of a little trouble that had occurred at the Star a few nights before, and in it had figured a certain cool, skillful desperado, who now seemed to be on his trail. Just when he had hoped that his secret was being buried it came to life in a vigorous form.

And then he felt as though he could not rest until he found out the extent of the revelations that were to come when the party returned from the old mission. He dared not fly, and he feared to remain.

While, then, he stood there, listening to distant sounds of loud, excited voices, he was startled, by a sudden touch on his shoulder.

Fiercely he wheeled around; but to his surprise it was Varna that stood by his side.

"What! you here?" he exclaimed sharply. "I was up not so very long ago and you were sleeping soundly. It might have been better if you had been awake then; or asleep now."

"Why? It is true I slept for a time; but something awakened me; and I called you. When I found that you were not there I came down. Has anything happened?"

"Much. Pedro Mercado has been killed and they tracked his murderer to the old ruin, and found an open grave and coffin, with a corpse in it. The ruffian escaped them for the time; but I believe that they have him. What may he not reveal? I could not stand it to remain there or I might have known his story by this time."

"Is that the cause of your uneasiness? Have no fears. It may be all the better. There are plenty of tigers here, that are ready to growl and rend when they see wolves getting the prey. If they find a scape-goat for our sins, in the shape of some ordinary ruffian, it will make us doubly safe, only we must know what is said and done. Come! If you fear to face this matter I will go with you. Yonder they have halted, and whatever is to be said and done will be over soon."

"You? But perhaps it will be best to act as you suggest. Westand or fall together."

Out from the shadow of the porch they moved, and again toward the Star, where there was a hubbub of voices.

The party had returned thither; and with them they brought a prisoner.

It was far on in the night, and a great many of the citizens of Tierra Roxo and vicinity were well advanced in their cups, so that everything was favorable for a sudden rise of the worst element, while even the better, if it happened to be abroad, was none too lenient to a desperado, taken in a crime. Several of the

party at the old mission were of the so-called law and order class, or, probably, there would have been no prisoner returned to Hangtown, no trial, no nonsense; only a dangling corpse and a whispered story for the morrow. As there had been more than one assassination of late, almost anybody would do for a victim. If a stranger, so much the better.

But a few insisted that the prisoner should have the benefit of what little law Judge Lynch might be able to dispense, and accordingly the captive was dragged into town, and right up to the Star of Empire.

The crowd would have surged on in; but at the threshold they were met by the proprietor, Fritz, who was heeled for the occasion.

Despite his name, which he had picked up somewhere and adopted, after the free and easy method of the West, Fritz was no Teuton. He had a firmly placid disposition, which viewed as matters of course a great many inconveniences to which he submitted in the line of his business. But a lynch court in his saloon was more than he was willing to stand, and so he frankly told the crowd.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, to the leaders, who were dragging on a limp, unresisting prisoner. "Ef ye'r goin' to hev a circus, set up yer own canvas; you can't pitch yer ring under mine. When two gentlemen hev a difficulty hyer, an' smash things a leetle, I don't say nothin', fur that's business; but hangin' a man's somethin' else. I don't want such fruit bunched on my lodge-pole, so jist have yer fun in ther open air. The night dew's won't hurt the most of you; an' as ther prisoner will be apt to go out of the wet very shortly, I don't think the damp will do him any harm."

He enforced his argument by holding up two navy revolvers of the largest size, and added in a steady voice:

"I mean it."

Fortunately the sober ones of the crowd were nearest the speaker, and understood his position exactly. It was shrewdly suspected that Fritz had his eye on some particular parties, and though a determined rush might dispose of him in short order, he would still have time to get in a shot or two that would not be conducive to the health of Hangtown, whatever it might do for its graveyard.

Those in front, then, checked the rush; turned, and after a short conference yielded gracefully in so far that they organized the court of Judge Lynch in the open air. As the proceedings would not be apt to take long it could make very little difference. Fritz was kind enough to put some of his lamps in the windows, two or three lanterns were hung out, and the prisoner, around whose waist had been twisted a cord, was allowed to double himself up on a bench under a guard, while the organization of the court went on.

"Now then, boys," sung out one of the captors. "We want a good solid man, with no nonsense in him, for Judge Lynch. Don't all speak at once, but let some level-headed man name his choice."

"I'll name Andy Barber," said a voice from the crowd, and the proposition was followed by as near to a general laugh as one could expect from men who were bent on such a deadly purpose as theirs. Andy Barber occupied an anomalous position, being credited with the post of City Marshal, though a confirmed sport.

"That's too thin," sung out an answering voice.

"Besides, he ain't here. Some of the boys run him into Hoodlum Hall when they saw a show for fun, an' him an' Lame Baker hez agreed to play draw till the party is over."

"I'll put up the man; he's in Fritz's now. It's Kunnel Dashwood. He's a square man, an' knows what's what."

"Bring him out, bring him out!" was choused by a score or more; and without delay a man or two started in search of the colonel, who was scarcely likely to decline the honor so unanimously conferred.

No one at first seemed to pay much attention to the prisoner, who was certainly not very rampant, but while the selection of a judge was being discussed, one man edged quietly up, and addressed him in a cheerful tone:

"Chirk up, ole man; yer ain't dead yet, so yer needn't look so blue. Ov course ther law's got to hev its swing, but ef I kin do anything to make you comfortable give us a hint an' I'll do it ef it takes my last duckat."

The man addressed moved his head a little, and no doubt was looking upward, but his

face was shaded with a broad-brimmed Mexican hat, that even then concealed his features.

"Thankee," he answered. "I'm dry as a fish, and mighty hungry. They wouldn't swing a man off on an empty stumjack, would they?"

"I don't know what they wouldn't do, but durned ef they shall. Hold on, hyer. I'll be 'round in a minute, er my name ain't Alabaster Jim."

It was that ubiquitous individual, as usual laying his foundations for any amount of trouble.

"Just water, James, just water," said the prisoner, stiffening visibly under the inspiring presence of the rough-and-ready sport.

"Water with a dash of bitters; I'll fix yer," and he hurried into the Star.

He was only gone a few moments, and returned, bringing a tumbler, and a chunk of meat hastily caught up.

The dash of whisky in the glass was so heavy that there was little room left for water, but down it went; and up came the spirits of the recipient. He braced himself, and looked sharply at his guards, who were keeping comfortably close, and had viewed with some disfavor the attentions of Alabaster Jim; but were also much interested in a sudden motion made to adjourn the court until after they could hang the accused.

The motion was made, and seconded vigorously by a dozen hang-dog looking fellows, who were anxious to push the work through before the colonel could take his seat on the bench, which, on this occasion was a store box.

"What's ther use ov wastin' ther time ov this yere court? Didn't we find him jist pilin' away ther stiff; an' when we told him to hold up his hands didn't he plug away at the hull crowd? He's a desprit character, and don't yer furgit it. Salt him down right now, er you may find him too fresh to keep. Yere's yer rope; go fur him!"

Jack McCaw's personal feelings were voiced by many others; and one of the as yet unplugged caught the rope, knotted a noose in it, and with a yell sprung forward.

"Hurrah, boys, hyar's what'll drag him out! Whar's the man that humps himself when the boys of Hangtown says, swing?"

"Hyar's ther identickle durned ole fool ez does that very thing. No trial no fun; an' hyer's two more ez sez ther same."

And Alabaster Jim, slipping deftly behind the prisoner, over his two shoulders extended two revolvers, and faced the swaying crowd, as cool as an iceberg.

CHAPTER XVI.

"BECAUSE I KNOW IT IS TRUE."

A UNIVERSAL howl went up at the bold defiance; but the front rank again played conservative, and Alabaster Jim kept the floor.

"Oh, you're a-howlin'; but I'm the law an' order, an' these two friends think allers ez I do. It may look like a small hand, but it's good fur all I risk on it. Ef yer don't believe me call it and see."

"He's another of 'em; he's a side pardner, an' needs ther same treatment. Yank 'em both out!" exclaimed McCaw, from the heart of the crowd.

"That's so. It's the knife-thrower, that fixed Kunnel Dash, right in this hyer saloon, the other night; hang 'em both!" added Harry Wade, who had journeyed in from the old mission with hopes of vengeance that were constantly expanding.

"I wouldn't try it on too fast, aryhov, onless yer willin' to die fur ther fun ov a fun'ral. Git up yer judge an' jury, an' ef ther's a squar' shake an' a clear case I'll pass; but while ther trial goes on, me an' my friends stands jist so, to see fair play, every time."

By this time, Colonel Dashwood, after some show of reluctance, had come out from the saloon, and as he saw the position of affairs and recognized the man behind the prisoner, a scowl distorted his face.

Nevertheless, as Alabaster Jim was in reality protecting the dignity of his court, he scarcely saw how he could at once express what he undoubtedly felt toward that cheerful individual; especially as he was not yet posted as to the way he had "chipped in;" and he suffered him to remain without notice.

Mounting the store box Colonel Dashwood addressed the crowd glibly enough, his words at once restoring something like order.

"Fellow-citizens," he said, "I understand there have been several murders lately, and that having captured the assassin over the body of one of his victims, you want to have the sanction of a court and jury before you send him off with a short rope on a long journey. I am glad that you show such a regard for the forms of law and justice, and I assure you that so far as I can control this court, both accusers and accused shall meet with fair play, and the best man shall undoubtedly win. Prisoner, stand forth!"

"That's squar' talk, kunnel," put in Alabaster Jim, "but I'd observe thet afore you put ther pris'ner on answer, ther' hed better be a jury picked; an' ez fur standin' up, I'm afeard you'll hev to excuse him. They've tried to make a sieve, an' just missed sp'ilin' a man. Thar's three er four bullet-holes in his head an' shoulders, an' I shouldn't wonder ef thar war enough ov ther lead left stickin' around him to weigh a pound, he seems so top-heavy."

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, quietly adopting the suggestion, "if it is the wish of this assemblage, select your jury, and proceed to business. I'm not yet in shape to do much talking, so I hope you won't expect it. I'd sooner handle the tools; and perhaps I will before this thing is over. Go on, now, and don't waste time."

At this rather direct allusion to himself and his affairs, there was a hum in the crowd, and every eye scanned his face narrowly.

As far as could be seen in the dim light, it presented little trace of the ghastly wound of a few nights before. A few strips of plaster had drawn the clean edges of the cut together, and in the short time that had elapsed they had already joined, so that he looked but little the worse for wear. Alabaster Jim, at the implied threat, manifested no uneasiness or interest; though he heard more than one voice muttering, "We'll hang 'em both afore morning!" Order was beginning to come out of chaos. A dozen men were quickly picked, to whom no objection was made, and then Dashwood announced that the court was open for transaction of business, and the accusers were requested to stand forth.

"One thing more, kunnel. This yere man don't seem able to talk fur himself, an' I just guess it wouldn't be more nor fair ef he had some one to speak fur him."

"I suppose that means that you wish to appear as his counsel, but it seems doubtful whether under the rules of this court you can be recognized as an attorney, not being a citizen of the camp, and being a subject of strong suspicion."

"That's so, kunnel," shouted Jack McCaw. "We're going to try 'em both, an' ef you say the word we'll take his pop-guns, and trice him right up."

"One thing at a time," said Jim, coolly. When he had seen that the danger of immediate lynching was over he had put up his pistols and was leaning carelessly against the wall of the building. "Finish yer first job, an' then trot out yer charges ag'in' me; but my name is fair play, an' I'm goin' to see that this pilgrim hes it. Ther talk ain't goin' to be all on one side."

"There is some sense in what the man says," interposed the judge, who seemed anxious to tone down rather than excite the passions of the crowd. "If the prisoner is not able to talk for himself, let him look around and select whom he chooses as his counsel. Certainly the men of Tierra Roxo, will do justice, even to an assassin. Prisoner, will you make your choice?"

Up raised the prisoner, a little slowly, but with signs of gathering strength, and thrusting up the overhanging brim of his hat with his two bound hands, he looked over the crowd of faces. There was not a single friendly one there.

From right to left, and back again, went his glances. Then suddenly he raised his hands and pointed straight at Victor Page, who was standing near, watching the proceedings, that had for him a strange fascination.

"There's one, I take it, is a stranger here, and an honest man with some brains. If I can't pull through by myself I want him to take hold of the tow rope and do his level best. You won't go back on me, will you, pard?"

Several score of heads turned with a suspicious jerk to see who was thus pointed out.

Again it was a stranger.

"That seems a reasonable request; let the

party selected step out. He can have a few moments' conference with the prisoner, but there has been too much time lost already."

In all the camp there was not a man, who ever had been more disagreeably surprised than was Victor Page at this minute. He had seen that strangers there were objects of suspicion, and that the less attention they attracted the better it was for their necks. To be thus pointed out was an invitation to trouble that once given could not well be declined. He could scarcely believe it possible that he was the man meant, and looked again.

But no mistake was there; and now, standing there, with the flaring brim of his hat pushed back, and eyes bent on him with a cold, commanding gaze, he saw his own victim, the man of the vaults of the old mission, Soft Hand, from Cinnabar.

A cry burst from his lips, and turning he would have staggered away but a detaining hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, stranger!" snarled a voice in his ear. "We're going into this thing altogether, and you can't shirk your share of the frolic. If there's any reason why you dasn't face the music we'll have to look it up; and maybe hang you too. You march up front."

"An' ef he don't come," added Alabaster Jim, whose quick eye and ear saw and heard, "I'll hev to draw on him; an' he orter know that I'm certain death."

"I'm only a stranger, as you say, drawn here by the noise and excitement," stammered Page, more unnerved by the resurrection of Soft Hand than his own personal danger. "I know nothing of the prisoner or of your ways of dealing with crime. Choose some one else who can defend him better, and let me go."

"Fool!" hissed Varna, at his side, "where is your nerve? Go to him, and do your best, either to have him hanged or set free; but don't waver now. As his counsel you can at least close his mouth. Who else is there to speak? And he does not intend to unless forced. You know him; there never was such another man."

And thus urged on, Page staggered forward to the side of Soft Hand and bending down listened to a few whispered words, while in brief, set terms Colonel Dashwood declared the strangely constituted court was open for business, and requested the accusers to begin with their evidence.

It had really seemed a very clear case to the mob, and when Tom Denham, who was the first witness called, had told his story it was clearer than ever.

Half a dozen of them were passing through the gulch when they stumbled over the body of Pedro Mercado, lately killed. The slayer had either gone on into Hangtown, or else taken the path up toward the old mission. As they had not passed him there was no other course open to him. Accordingly the party separated, and three of them went to the ruin where, in the vaults they came upon the prisoner, as already detailed. They had but a glimpse of him, but in the light of subsequent events they were satisfied that the man who had faced them there was the prisoner at the bar here, whom, a little later, he, Denham, had found in the hands of some of the men who had come out from Tierra Roxo. He stood aside to let one of them tell the further history of the arrest.

Damon Carter was one of those who dashed away after the horseman who, on their approach, had ridden away from the mission. The rider, whoever he was, was thoroughly reckless, and went down the hill at break-neck speed, plunging into the shadow of the trees in a way that few of them would have cared to risk. Without much hope of overtaking him unless he accidentally came to grief, they ran after, one or two discharging their revolvers at a venture.

They were rewarded by hearing the noise made by a blundering fall. A minute later the horse seemed to recover himself and dart off with renewed speed.

Down they all went, and after a long hunt saw a man stealing away, and as he refused to halt, and seemed inclined to show fight, a volley was fired that dropped him. This man was the prisoner at the bar.

Then Harry Wade took the stand, or rather stood up, facing the crowd, and after detailing again how they came upon the prisoner, he added the result of the investigation subsequently made. From the grave they had dragged out the corpse of a man well known to

the men of the camp, one Jack Brace, who had been missing for some days.

Alabaster Jim bent down and whispered in the ear of the counsel for defense, who up to this time had remained silent, and Page nodded his head. Then in a voice that faltered somewhat he asked:

"Did not both of these men announce their intention of leaving town some days ago?"

Wade hesitated a moment before he answered; then confessed that he had heard something of the kind.

"And did they not disappear the same night?"

He confessed that they did, according to the best of his knowledge and recollection.

"And if they had not been seen about the camp since, was it not likely that they had left for some sinister object? How else could you account for their bodies being found on the opposite side of the town?"

"That's your conundrum; answer it yourself," answered Wade, sharply.

"What was the character of these two men? Were they honest miners, or were they gamblers or loafers by profession?"

"I can't see that that makes a difference. I reckon foul play is foul play. If we let this secret stabbin' an' shootin' go on, everybody 'll be afeard to have a leetle fun. I b'lieve that cuss an' his pards killed 'em both, an' that's all I keer to know."

"It makes a great deal of difference," said Page, straightening up, "because those two men, and another, prepared the grave for this man, who escaped from it by a miracle. He was buried there alive, and if he had killed them a dozen times, it would have been no more than they deserved. For three days he lay there, part of the time unconscious. He revived to find himself in the open air, and a few moments later he was set upon by the men who had tracked the slayer of Pedro Mercado to the old mission. Who that slayer was we know not, but believe it was the third man. Your prisoner is the victim and not the criminal. His story, if he is strong enough to tell it, will carry truth on its face. Who was the man in the vault we know not, nor who was the man on horseback, but it was not Charles Jones, of Cinnabar, and we shall demand his acquittal."

This wildly improbable story was greeted with a yell of disapproval, and for a moment it seemed as though the court was to be broken up in a row, and summary punishment inflicted without even the authority of Judge Lynch. Such a preposterous defense was too thin, even for Tierra Roxo.

And then, suddenly, to the most intense surprise of all Colonel Dashwood faced the crowd, waving his hand for silence, at the same time exclaiming in stentorian tones:

"Silence in the court. While I'm running this thing, I'll have the dignity of this court respected or drill the first man that is guilty of contempt. You've put me up for Judge Lynch, and Lynch law you shall have!"

"But, kunnel, men that play such a hand as that on Hangtown ought to be strung; stand out of the way and let us at them."

Such was the substance of a dozen speeches; but to one and all came back the single, stern answer:

"You men know I'm no friend of his, for he's one of the party I'm waiting to settle with about the fun the other night at the Star; but I'm square as a die, and as judge I say the defense is a good one, because I know it is true."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALABASTER JIM'S GRATITUDE.

SPITE of their savage fury the crowd had sense enough to halt and listen; for some were personal friends of the colonel, and the rest knew that he was no trifler.

And then, over the shoulders of the prisoner, again peeped the revolvers of Alabaster Jim.

In the universal hush that followed the startling announcement the latter was the only one to audibly voice his sentiments:

"Say that ag'in, kunnel; I sw'ar yer bleacin'! It's gospil truth, but who ther sanctified blazes would 'a' thort o' hearin' it from you?"

Dashwood paid no attention to this interruption. Now that every one was silent, if still incredulous, and waiting to hear what further explanation was to be given, he continued

quite leisurely, for he had been averse, all along, to raising his voice.

"To save this camp trouble I might have told my story sooner, but I confess I did not understand it until now. You all know I have an interest over in Gopher Gulch, and there's a short cut that takes me right past the mission. Well, to-night I was coming along, without suspicion of anything crooked around the old pile, when I thought I saw a light, low down. I have as much nerve as the next, and throwing my bridle over my horse's head, I began to investigate.

"The light came from a little opening in the cellar wall, and I put my eye down just as McCaw and the others clinched onto the greased lightning. I saw the fellow dart away, and sprung for my horse, for I knew that by the time I could get around he would be well down the gulch.

"As it was, he must have disappeared just as the second crowd came up, and they saw only me in pursuit. My horse gave a stumble, but as he's not entirely a young earthquake, I didn't tumble but gathered him up, and after the fellow I went, until finally I lost track of him just at the edge of town. That is what I know about it, told in the short. I kept quiet until I could see just where it fitted into the rest, and now if there's no more direct evidence against this man we can let him tell his own story, bring in his witnesses if he has any, and then it will be a question for the jury, whether or not he is guilty."

"But, kunnel," interposed Harry Wade, "how about the t'other one? We're tryin' 'em both, fur pards they seem to be, an' we hoped to swing 'em up together. Jes' say the word, an' up they go."

There was no mistake but what there were a great many men in camp who had taken a strong dislike to the prisoner, and his backer, Alabaster Jim; and Wade's words only echoed their sentiments. There were a great many more who didn't care which way things went, and then there were a few who were anxious to see strict justice meted out.

"No, sir, there's only one way now out of this without making it bloody murder. Hear the case and decide it according to the evidence. If you don't want to do that, adjourn the court and settle with me. I'm Judge Lynch, just now, and the only mandamus I recognize is this."

Down to his waist dropped his hands as he spoke, and every man there knew that he meant what he said.

"Ef that's the gait we may as well turn him loose and go home, but it's durned queer yer takes such a fancy to a cuss that mopped ther Star floor all up with ye. Maybe yer afeard he'll do it ag'in."

In sulky tones came a voice from the crowd, and Dashwood glared around him, for his anger seemed to suddenly jump up to fever heat; but the tones were disguised, and no one cared to point out the offender, even if they knew.

"Any one that knows me ought to know that I fear no man living. I play an honest hand, and want no cold deck or bottom deal. We'll hear the statement of the prisoner, and then the case goes to the jury. Prisoner, stand up, state your name and residence, and then tell us the facts in the case; and if you are wise you'll stick to the truth, fur if this court catches you in a lie it will be the last one you'll ever tell."

Nothing abashed the prisoner arose.

"I've had several names—they call me Cinnabar Charley, and Soft Hand Charley, and Charley Jones from Cinnabar. Any of 'em 'll do fur a handle fur a man in my fix. I've been 'round here for some days, and had a mind to stop but fer good reasons went out on the stage a few nights ago. We had a round with the agents and stood them off, though one of the passengers got it in the breast too bad to go on and I've been nursing him.

"As I was going out from town with some medicine and grub three men lassoed me and the fall knocked me endways. When I came to I was up there and they were getting ready for a funeral. The three had masks on, and some other trumpery and I didn't know 'em from Adam; but anyhow they nailed me up in the box and stuck me in a hole. They covered me up but left a place to breathe, and it wasn't just so uncomfortable, but it was all-fired lonesome.

"Who dug me out I don't know, because I lost my senses; and the next thing I knew I

was lying in the open air. Then the roosters from Hangtown chipped in, and the balance you know better than I can tell it to you."

A few questions were asked, though their prompt answer threw little more light on the subject. The only probable theory was that the road-agents had buried him alive as a punishment for his successful resistance.

"Gentlemen of the jury," asked the colonel, "you have heard the testimony, how say you? Is the prisoner guilty or not guilty?"

Together went a dozen heads in earnest consultation. It was by no means certain what the verdict might be.

At length the foreman, Hart Monroe, stood up. He was an intelligent man, and a hard worker, if he did sometimes raid the town on a spree.

"May it please the court," he began, "we find the charges not proven; but the prisoner and his pard had better leave town."

"All right," responded Colonel Dashwood shortly, ignoring the inclusion of Alabaster Jim. "The prisoner is discharged and has one hour to accept the finding of the jury. After that Tierra Roxo will no doubt be unhealthy."

Down upon the back of Soft Hand came the paw of Alabaster Jim, with a resounding whack.

"All right, pard; didn't I told yer so? 'Nothin' like havin' a white man fur judge. I'm mighty glad now that I didn't play him fur keeps t'other night. Is'pose we'll hev to waltz; an' your way an' mine hed better lie alongside fur a leetle, in case we needs a saw-bones er a fizziker."

"I'm not so sure about leaving; there's sixty minutes to consider in and that's a good long while to look ahead. I'll talk to you in a minute more; keep an eye out, for friends are scarce in this crowd. There's too many of them stood in with the late lamented Pedro. I want a word with my counsel; I mustn't be ungrateful."

There was a dubious sort of smile on his face as he looked around, that seemed to say that however much Victor Page might have aided him in the late emergency he was not over and above friendly toward him; and from a keen glance he shot at Colonel Dashwood it was possible that he had his suspicions in that direction also.

He was just in time to obtain the desired word with Victor, who was slipping quietly into the Star, intending to make his exit by a back door and rejoin Varna, whom he had seen depart when the chances of the trial had seemingly turned in favor of the prisoner. He startled, but did not attempt to resist or break away, when Soft Hand called him by name; and suffered himself to be led aside into a little alcove.

"Well," said the resurrected man, grimly, "water won't kill, fire won't burn, the grave throws me up, and the rope refuses to hang; don't you think it is about time to quit this foolishness? You've had all the fun on your side, so far; but I reckon it won't be any slouch of a game if I begin to hunt a little myself. Will you quit; or shall I begin?"

"I don't altogether understand your fire and water business, and the less said about the rest the better. I had my fling, but missed. Something stole all my nerve away. I was fool enough to think sometimes that somewhere there had been a mistake. Take my advice and get away from this. As long as the hands are on the board I cannot draw out if I want to; and if I do there are others ready to stock the cards against you so as to make the game most certainly a losing one. We just helped each other to-night because it suited us both, but I have no idea that either of us can forget or forgive. When you see me again I will be in a different mood, but just now I am talking the honest truth."

"Well, thank you, all the same, for dropping to the necessities of the game; and the next time you try that kind of work you won't catch me asleep."

So the two foes to the death talked thus coolly, and with one long steady glance on both sides, to fix beyond forgetfulness the face of each, they separated.

Meantime Alabaster Jim, perfectly unmindful of more than one lowering face and scarcely murmured threat, stepped airily away as Soft Hand left him.

Colonel Dashwood was his objective point, and before him he halted, with a good-humored smile.

"Kunnel, ther time's short and you don't want to stand hyer listenin' to chin music; but I'll tell you short you've done ther squar' thing to-night. Mebbe you've made a mistake, but I don't say so. I'd hate to go back on a squar' man; I'd hate it ther dog-gonest; an' I don't want you to think I'd do it."

There was considerable earnestness in the last sentence or two, and as there were plenty of anxious listeners more than one significant glance passed between them. It sounded as though the man was losing some of his "sand."

And if that fact once became patent there were those who did not believe his life would be worth an hour's purchase in Hangtown.

Even Dashwood seemed to think so, for he listened with a wicked sneer on his face.

"What I think is, that you'd better get right out of this camp—"

"Hold on, hold on! That's my idear too; I've fooled away too much time already in a camp whar it's all blow an' nary fun. But what I did want afore I went was to give you a chance to take all I owe you out of my ding-blasted ole hide. You sha'n't say Alabaster Jim skipped ther ranch an' furgot his board bill. Knife, pistol er ther mawlers, it's all ther same to me. You hes' yer weepins an' kin take yer choice. Ef ther's ary way I kin offer fairder then that, spit it out. I tell yer I wouldn't go back on a man that's acted ther clean corn like you hev, fur a hull mount'in ov rocks!"

"You infernal idiot, what do you mean? Do you think because I let myself be drawn into a brawl with you the other night that I am setting myself up for a target for every Tom, Dick and Harry that is willing to risk his life to gain a little cheap reputation? Why, man, if you draw on me you'll never see another sunrise. You would have to fight the whole of Hangtown."

"What ov it?" coolly answered Jim. "I've taken a bigger contract more ner once, an' I'm hyer now; but ef you ain't bankerin', an' won't say I went back on you, 'altee lightee.' I'll go hunt up my pard, an' we'll swing out. Yer jist ez easy satisfied a man ez I ever seen, an' so I'll tell 'em."

Down to a whisper dropped the voice of the colonel, and if it had been a little lighter it would have been seen that his face was white with anger.

"Go your ways, but you'll find when the time comes, that my arm is long enough to reach you. This is not the time and place; but you can stake every dollar you can raise that before I am done with you I'll kill you both."

"Well, don't bury us till we're dead an' I guess we kin stand ther squeeze. So long. I'm goin'."

And Alabaster Jim swaggered away in search of his companion in banishment.

CHAPTER XIX.

KATE WILKINS STRIKES AN AMBUSCADE.

As the soft spoken man from Cinnabar had conjectured, Harold Wilkins was not so badly injured; and the only question was, whether his system, which seemed much enfeebled by sickness, could stand the shock that it had received. Under the same amount of damage Alabaster Jim would doubtless have been out the next day as though nothing had happened; but Mr. Wilkins was not possessed of such a cast-iron constitution, and was weak and feverish, though under the nursing of his daughter, and the man whom he persisted in calling Mr. Jones, he got along, as well as could be expected.

The proprietress of the ranch was something of an original in her way, and under a rough exterior had a kind enough heart, and seemed to take a liking to father and daughter; but she had her hands pretty full attending to her own affairs, so that they saw comparatively little of her.

The morning after their arrival Soft Hand had asked casually:

"Where's the rest of your family; or wasn't that girl-boy I had a glimpse of last night part of it?"

"Faith, an' yez sees all ther is av me when yez see Irish Molly herself."

"But the girl?"

"She's a friend; an' a moighty nice one she is wid her foine face an' thrue heart. Her name is Catalina Triscador an' she shtops over noight wid me now an' thin. Yez frightened her off er she'd bin wid me now. Sure yez

must have eyes in the back of the head to have noticed her at all, though it was yer friend that talked to her, mighty interested loike."

He repeated the name after her several times, and shook his head as though trying to recall something that had escaped his memory.

"She lives near here does she?" he asked quickly.

"Not onless a half dozen miles is near. It's a good long gallop; but thin she's the wan that kin take it. She had a bit ov thrubble wanst, an' it would 'a' bin worse but of kim along an' betwain us we driv off ther plunderin' villains wid lead fleas in the'r ears. Oh, it's brave she is; an' it moight be well if the young leddy there had some av her speerit, fur this is a bad place fur a lone woman."

Mr. Wilkins requiring his services the conversation ended here; and was not renewed. Up to the time of the sudden, and, to Wilkins, mysterious disappearance of Soft Hand, nothing more was said about her, nor did she again make her appearance at the ranch.

On that night, when the hours went by and there were no signs of the return of the bronze-bearded man, Kate became strangely nervous. Irish Molly had returned from looking after her stock and was sleeping soundly; her father was resting quietly, free from fever and stronger than he had been for a long time. There seemed no reason why she should not sleep herself; but she could not. She got up and went out, standing in the fresh night air, with her head turned, listening for any sound that might come from the head of the gulch. The absence of the quiet, self-contained man, who had scarcely spoken to her and yet who had proved himself kind, thoughtful and skillful, gave her a sense of loneliness that seemed strange indeed, for really she did not anticipate any danger; but felt rather that some one was approaching.

Sure enough, when she had wandered some little distance from the house she heard rapid hoof-strokes, and thought without doubt that the man came at last.

Then, to her surprise, the rider came to a sudden halt, apparently just around the bend a few hundred yards away, and listening eagerly she heard the hum of voices, engaged in earnest conversation.

Who could be there at this time of night? A desire to know possessed her. Gathering her short skirts still more closely around her, she stole along under the shadows of the bluff, winding her way among the bushes and between the trees that bordered the clear road, until she reached the bend in the gulch.

Here she dropped upon her hands and knees; for though the role of spy was distasteful enough, she had had her suspicions awakened as she drew nearer to the spot. The voices that she heard were voices of strangers.

Close to the wall of the gulch she crept, and at last reached a spot from whence she could both see and hear whatever was to be seen or heard.

It was a singular sight that met her eyes; and one calculated to bring a chill of fear to a woman's heart, however brave she might be.

Just beyond the bend the narrow roadway widened out into a little dingle; and here, facing half a dozen horsemen, was one that, at a glance, Kate recognized as Catalina Triscador, the friend of the lone Irishwoman.

Certainly Molly had not spoken too highly of her courage, for, with a revolver in either outstretched hand she menaced the men before her.

Nor did Kate have much trouble in recognizing who the men were, for every one of them was masked, as were the highwaymen who had attacked the stage a few nights before. Five of them were bunched together in a little group some thirty yards away; while twenty yards nearer was a single horseman, the leader, at whose breast Catalina pointed the weapon in her right hand with deadly aim.

"It is no use," she was saying, "Captain Skull, you cannot pass here. I am only one, and a woman; but for the present I am strong and you are weak. Go back. As true as I am a living girl if you attempt to move a step further you will move to your death."

"What nonsense is this, girl? Put up that plaything and stand aside. No one here would willingly harm you; but you must know that these riders of the night cannot be baffled by a woman; even though that woman may be Catalina Triscador."

"Tall words those, my valiant captain; but I mean what I say. Your men will hesitate

before they fire upon me, and I doubt whether you would raise your cruel hand, even if I did not have you covered with an aim that never misses. Go back! While I can prevent it at any cost you shall not harm him who lies in yonder gulch."

"High, oh! In the name of wonder, what makes you his champion? But if that is all that troubles you stand aside. It is not a man we are after, but a woman. If that will do you any good we will swear to you that if the man will stand aside no man shall be hurt."

"Do you suppose that any man would hold his hand and see a woman falling into your clutches? No, sir. Go back. I am a guard here now, and you shall not pass. By daylight they shall have warning, and, as you and your men are night birds, before you can swoop again for your prey it will be gone."

This was the conversation that Kate heard; and now, thinking a sudden crisis inevitable, she drew from her breast her own revolver, carried there always for an emergency, and crept still closer. Although she was fonder of flight than fight she had no intention of deserting the woman who had stood up as her champion.

She dared not make her presence known as yet; she hoped that the necessity for doing so might be altogether wanting; but all the same she was ready to join forces and wage war, desperate even though unsuccessful.

And as she settled down behind a little clump of bushes, that served as a complete shield, suddenly around her waist, there stole a strong arm, that seized and held her wrist beyond chance of mischief, and over her mouth was placed a huge hand, that choked all chance of cry or groan.

She had glided into an ambushade and without chance of rescue was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XX.

THE EXILES.

If there had been any possible profit, or even a little streak of glory in it Alabaster Jim would probably have been willing to stay and run the risk of a hand to hand conflict with the whole of Tierra Rixo. As there was a decided risk and no money in the operation and the citizens bowing to the judgment of the court, gave evidence that after the expiration of the sixty minutes grace they intended to argue the case with shot-guns, he joined Soft Hand, as the latter came out from the Star, and stalked silently by his side, the two marching due north. He had a careful eye for any attempted treachery; but he need not have borrowed trouble on that score, for half the crowd had gone to their homes and the rest were strangely well under control. There did not seem to be even an attendant spy, to see how well they carried out the behests of the court.

A half-mile from town the two halted, on the near side of the crest of a little spur from the mountain, that ran across their route. The stop seemed to be by common consent; and then the two looked at each other a moment, Alabaster Jim finally breaking into a hoarse laugh.

"Well, dog-gone my pictur's! thet's my first visit thar, an' I don't keer ef it's my last. It's a one-horse place, an' ther mule thet runs it is thet Kunnel Dashwood, ez they call him. I ain't bloodthirsty, but I'd give an eagle er two to have another round with him."

"You'll have it if you travel this road much further. You had better make up your mind about that, quick, and if you don't want to tackle him and his friends, go some other way."

"See hyar. Is this kunnel a friend o' yours?"

"He likes you a little the best of the two."

"Well, what in thunder did he come down on you so light fur, then? I thought they had it all set up to have a good send-off, and he just spoiled the lay-out; not to say nothin' of my leetle game bein' blocked fur makin' that Page squirm. Lordy! how I'd have dreened him out down in 'Frisco."

"He wanted to save Page, I suppose—but that isn't the question. We ain't out of the woods by a long chalk, and what I want to know is whether we are going to walk on over this hill, right into the crowd that is waiting for us. You bet they're there; and I guess they picked out enough men to bring us into camp."

"Right you are, old man, I was a fool not to think of that sooner. There's sport ahead, after all. Sail in; I'm with you."

In his enthusiasm Alabaster Jim drew two revolvers, swinging them around his head, and was about to give vent to a shrill war-whoop, when his companion uttered a warning:

"Hush!"

"Oh, dingblast it! I felt so good I purty nigh forgot myself. Sure enough, ef they drop to our leetle game, they might run away."

"No such good luck as that. Just remember, I'm bare-handed; and have something else to do besides setting myself up for a mark for roughs and road agents to pop away at."

"You ain't heeled? Why, pard, why didn't you shout sooner? S'pose they'd begun to play pepper and salt, an' you'd hed no show—I'd never fergive myself. Hyar's ther tools; I allers carry an extra cargo. Shove these in yer belt."

From either boot he drew out a navy six, and tendered them with a flourish.

"Now, then, me pistol pard, sail in!"

"Yes; if we can do no better, but just listen a little and see if I don't talk square common sense."

While the two were holding their council-of-war, the enemy in the gulch on the other side of the hill were beginning to grow uneasy.

For they were there. It really seemed as though the soft-handed sport had been furnished with a pair of these double million optical magnifiers that laughed at deal doors and stair-cases, and could see right through the side of a hill.

Something less than a dozen were there in the crowd that crouched behind the bushes; all armed with shot-guns or rifles, in addition to their pistols, and they had been ensconced there for a good half-hour, since they had left Hangtown some little while before the conclusion of the trial.

The time seemed longer to them than actually was, and one after another they began to grumble:

"I say, this is low-down enough business to put us on without asking us to stay hyer all night to run it through. Ef you go up to the top of the hill I'd put up all my rocks you'd see the streaks of sunshine in the East. I don't believe they're coming this way at all. Like as not the boys kicked and hung 'em up anyhow."

"Er they've pulled their sixes and took the town. There's a thundering sight more fuss made over them than I'd make if I had the planning of it. I wanted to just lean out of the Star window and salivate them loth as they stood there, but the captain wouldn't listen to reason, nobow. Blamed if I'm going to stay here much longer. There's more than one road out of Hangtown, and I'll go you a dollar they've took the wrong one."

"He said they'd have an hour to leave in; an' that they'd go two-forty when they struck the level. This don't look much like it."

"It ish mine obinion that they gife der gourdt swei hour to moof der camp," interposed a stolid faced, Teutonic looking individual, as he proceeded to fill a short clay pipe.

"I'll sbtay mid der bushes dill daylight; but, I dinks dish pees a ferry thin job. In goorse ve gits der sbtamps all der same; an' not so mooch tanger. Ven you sees 'em goom down mit der road shoost dells me, vill yer?"

The German sport looked the very picture of complacency as he placed the pipe in his mouth and struck a match upon his knee, despite a warning growl from one or two of his associates.

Then he held up the match and applied the sputtering little flame to the mouth of the bowl.

"Crack! Smash!"

From the higher ground to the rear there came the report of a pistol, and a bullet sped past his face, that broke the bowl of the pipe to flinders, cutting it deftly out from between the Dutchman's fingers. At the same time a chorus of shouts arose, and then the clear tones of Alabaster Jim:

"Warp it to them, pard. Don't throw away a shot, an' we'll jist string this road to Hangtown with corpses. Ki'er yer men an' then pull."

The unlucky smoker dropped the fragment of pipe-stem from between his teeth as he uttered a yell that should have been heard half a mile, and bounded into the air. When he came down he did not cease bounding, but kept

straight on, in a bull-headed rush for the camp. The sudden attack from the rear was more than he could stand, and off he went.

The first movement in a crowd is generally the one that is followed. Instead of bushwhacking these men were being bushwhacked, and that unnerved them. There was no lying in wait for these two men whom they had tried to fancy as timid fugitives from justice; on the contrary, the expatriated wickedness of Hangtown was charging them. The panic spread in one electric thrill, and as the Dutchman raced up the hill the rest of the party were so close behind that a couple of good-sized table-cloths would have covered the crowd.

The actual scare only lasted a moment; but when it was over it was really too late for anything to be done, for not even that abandoned set had the cheek to turn around and go back to attack the two from whom they had just fled like frightened sheep. And they knew, too, that they had lost their advantage of numbers by giving away their position. It is true that no one knew very much about the two, except by a single piece of sample work, but judging from that it was pretty certain that they could give a good account of themselves, and it would not be surprising if they killed half the party of would-be lynchers in case the latter attempted to storm their position. Truly the flank movement was a master stroke, for to it the exiles were indebted for a bloodless victory. Back to Tierra Roxo went the dozen, while the two having satisfied themselves that all danger of present pursuit was over, again turned northward, and plodded along the road until they came to the head of Red Cat gulch, where Soft Hand halted.

"It's little use, for I'll bet ten to one we don't find Wilkins here; but we'll go down and see. Irish Molly's will do for a base of operations; and I'm not done with Hangtown yet, by a jugful."

"Hyer's with you, pard. Down we go."

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. WILKINS BEGINS TO ACT.

CATALINA TRISCADOR, with flashing eyes and poised weapons, barred the way for the men of Captain Skull—and then, suddenly, it seemed as if her nerve had conquered; at least in the present fight. The leader of the outlaws turned his face half-way around and made a backward gesture with his hand.

"Enough then, men. It's but a chicken; but she'll strike as hard as she crows; fall back! Another time will do better, when there will be more booty and less hard knocks. About face, and take the back trail! I will join you in a moment."

There was neither grumbling nor hesitation in the ranks of the Skulls. Instantly they wheeled, and then Catalina heard the trampling of their retreating steps."

"There, girl, you have done what no man could have done. Be satisfied with your temporary victory. Go your way; warn them if you choose; but remember that you have only checked, not conquered; and the delay of a few hours is nothing to one who has waited years for his revenge. Perhaps it is better so."

"You cannot deceive me, there is some treachery about this; but I shall do my best, and if I fail you will have a dearly-bought victory. Are you going now?"

"Ha, ha! How the little midget puts on airs! Do you know I have half a mind to test you? If you get into your vain little noddle an idea that you are a better man than Captain Skull, heaven and earth won't be large enough to hold you."

The man dropped his hand down toward his belt, as if inclined to draw a weapon and carry out his careless threat, but Catalina broke in with startling energy:

"Hold! For heaven's sake do not force me to stain my hand with your blood. Perhaps I am wrong as to whose face hides behind that mask, but right or wrong, I shall not hesitate to keep my word!"

"Even at the cost of some regrets afterward. Well, well, let us come to terms, then. I will go my way and you go yours. There is nothing more to do here to-night, and I think none the worse of you for what you have done, though I have some curiosity to know what will be your next move."

"I shall do what I should have done before; warn them of their danger."

"Then go; perhaps you are striking nearer home than you imagine. Good-night, I'm off."

He turned his horse, which paced leisurely away.

The girl was still suspicious. She kept her eyes still fixed upon him, and drawing back her reins, backed her horse steadily until sheltered by the curve of the gulch. Then she wheeled and darted away toward Irish Molly's, now close at hand, but, as she came up to the building from the lately left dingle behind her, there rose on the cool night air the sound of one shrill scream from a woman's lips, and immediately afterward the sounds of a mad gallop.

Then she knew that treachery had been at work, though of what kind she could not even guess. She flung herself from her saddle, and rushed into the ranch through the door, that she found wide open.

A light was burning, and at first glance she saw that Harold Wilkins was no longer in his couch, while seated in a chair, bound and gagged, Irish Molly glared at her with the look of a madwoman. She had come too late to save.

Meantime, in the dingle above, the woman she was trying to save had, by her own boldness, fallen into the snare that really was not set for her. So strong was the arm about her waist, so closely upon her mouth was pressed the great hand of her captor, that movement or cry alike seemed impossible, though either might bring to her rescue the brave Catalina, who only a few yards away was pleading her cause without any apparent suspicion that she was so near.

Hardly had the girl disappeared, before Captain Skull wheeled once more, and she was borne out of the sheltering bushes to meet him.

"I have her, captain," growled a coarse voice. "What in thunder she war doin' in thar I can't say, but thar she war; an' when I struck her I just let the other one go an' froze on. I reckon it's all O. K."

"Right, Kit, a thousand times. I won't forget you. Woman, I know you. No art nor disguise can hide you from me as you are; no superstitious nonsense can make me believe that you are a shadow from the sea. I have been biding my time and now, at last, you have come to meet your doom. If my voice has not betrayed me look in my face and see."

As he spoke Captain Skull threw back the serape that clung around his shoulders, raised the mask that had concealed his face, and glared at her with his great, black, burning eyes, that even in the faint light seemed to pierce her through and through.

Then it was that, the hand having dropped from her mouth, she uttered the scream that had reached Catalina's ears; and a moment later she sunk senseless and cold to the ground.

"Nothing like quiet strategy, and an eye to what may happen. If no mistake has been made by Leon our work has been well done. Give her to me, and you make your way quietly along in the shadow until you can see what is going on at the ranch. And beware that you do not stir up that little tiger-cat again. Her time is not yet come."

Without hesitation the man picked the motionless body from the ground, and heavy though the dead weight was, tossed it up, without an effort, into the outstretched arms of Captain Skull. Then the two separated, Kit, the outlaw, stealing away on his errand.

As he came in sight of the cabin he saw Catalina's mustang standing in front of the door, quietly nipping at the herbage. Quietly as he drew near, and carefully as he kept himself concealed the animal started, pricked back his ears, turned his head toward the prowler and gave a low snort.

"Chut!" whispered the outlaw. "Keep quiet old fellow; you ought ter know me."

The voice, low though it was, quieted the animal, for it stood motionless again, while Kit stole on up to the window.

Within were but two persons, Catalina and the Irishwoman. The latter had just been unbound, and was giving to her visitor a hurried account of what had happened.

"Troth, me darlint, I woke up all in a trimble, an' that same it's sildim that Irish Molly does, er she wouldn't be here now wid' a foine ranch, an' cattle on the hills. But trimblin' I was, though everything was quiet es the grave; an' I knew there was somethin' wrong, all along av that quare feelin', so I started fur the door. Jist thin up pops Mischther Wilkins, rist his sowl, an' out through the winder. It was

a clane joomp, an' whin I give a yell an' threw open the door three big spalpeens fell on me, pickin' me off me fate like a big baby, set me down here, an' thrussed me up afore oi could give a squal. Then three more av the same sort ploonged roight over fur the bed; an' sure it was empty. At that the swearin' bate iverything."

"But the girl—the woman? What of her? Surely this Wilkins was not such a coward as to desert her."

"She must have been gone afore. Not a sign ov ayther ov thim was in the house. It was all over in a minute. Out they wint and found his tracks outside, an' afther him they wint, an' av they come back it's a hot time they'll have now that we're riddy fur thim. Sure yez wouldn't risk it to go out ag'in wid thim thafes av the worruld a-prowlin' around."

"Perhaps. One thing is certain I seem to have thrown away my work. Yet who would have suspected a double movement. No wonder he was willing to temporize with me since his other band of ruffians was doing his work. Yet I do not understand it altogether. Where was the light-haired man, the one that has been nursing Wilkins. Surely he was honest and true and would not desert a friend."

"Faith! av that same quiet man had been here it's loively times there'd been fur the b'ys; but it's to Hangtown he wint, afore dark, and it's back he's not come yit. Whin he does, look out!"

"Not back yet!" exclaimed Catalina, sharply. "Then I will wager there has been more foul play. By heavens! they have made a tool of me for the last time. Good night."

She wheeled abruptly, and passed out of the door, just in time to catch sight of Kit, the outlaw, stealing away.

"Halt there!" she cried. "A word with you!"

She pointed a revolver at him as she spoke, but he only bounded away to the side of her mustang, and with one leap was upon his back, bending low behind him, as with voice and foot he urged him away.

Off went the animal with frightened bounds, for perhaps a dozen yards. Then, at a shrill signal from his mistress, he halted as suddenly, gave a quick half turn, threw his heels in the air and his rider to the ground, following up his work by completing his wheel and planting both hoofs full and fair upon the breast of the unlucky Kit.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Catalina, replacing her revolvers. "After a salute from Moonshine's heels it's little that you can have to tell me. Fool that you were to meddle with my faithful friend. Moonshine, come here."

Without an instant's delay the intelligent animal obeyed, and swinging herself into the saddle rider and steed darted up the gulch.

"If it should be the truth," she muttered to herself as she went along. "If it should be the truth, and I too late, the regrets of a lifetime would be poor punishment!"

Was it too late?

As she swept around the bend and through the dingle a little in front of her there came the sound of the sharp crack of a pistol. As Captain Skull, still mounted, was moistening the lips of his captive with the contents of his flask, from the side of the gulch Harold Wilkins leaped down, and giving one glance pulled a trigger.

For a moment the outlaw wavered, then his arms unclasped from his prey, and man and woman pitched heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XXII.

INTO THE VERY LAIR.

THE man who thus suddenly and unexpectedly came to the rescue was indeed Harold Wilkins; and he had acted with a nerve and promptness that one would hardly have looked for.

In some miraculous way his strength seemed largely restored, and having distanced his pursuers he had struck in just in time.

Far from being injured, the fall seemed to have a reviving effect, for almost instantly Kate rose to her feet, weak but with all her senses on the alert. A single glimpse was sufficient. In that look she recognized him.

"Take me away!" she said, faintly. "He is here. Quick! you are in deadly danger. So are we both."

"Fear nothing; he will harm no one again,

unless I am greatly mistaken. See! he lies there motionless with my bullet through his brain. The end has come at last. Who would have expected to find it here?"

He spoke weakly, and yet with a strange fever of exaltation, and holding with one hand to the rein of the horse that he had captured as his riders fell, with the other he pointed to the figure of the prostrate man.

Kate started.

"What, dead?"

"So I believe. It was his life or yours—and my own some time. Why should I have hesitated? Yet, come. There is no time for delay. His tools are on my track; it was by miracle alone that I escaped them, and that shot will bring them here. Come, let us mount and be off while there is the chance. Ah! what mean you?"

"What? and leave him here to die alone? For, see! He is not dead yet."

She was kneeling with a woman's consistency by the side of the prostrate man—it was the movement to his side that called forth the last question from Wilkins. She had the head of Captain Skull pillowed on her knee, and was holding the tips of her fingers to his heart.

"Dead? of course he is not dead. If he was it would be the worse for you both. It will be bad enough anyhow, for he has a long arm, a strong grasp and never forgives."

The two looked around with a startled glance, as the voice of a stranger fell upon their ears, Wilkins making a movement toward the pistol that he had returned to his bosom.

"None of that!" added Catalina, sharply. "I am inclined to be your friend, but I will run no risks of treachery. I am as good a shot, and I can pull the trigger before you can draw."

"But—but who are you?" queried Wilkins, hesitating.

Without reply the girl stepped forward and bent over Captain Skull, whose head had again dropped to the ground. Then she felt the top of his head, and though her hand, when she drew it away, was stained with blood, she manifested little trepidation or repugnance.

"Yes, he lives; if you would live, too, come with me. There is but one route open."

"And you! in heaven's name, who are you?"

"I know not; perhaps a friend. Come or stay as you choose. I hear the bloodhounds in the distance, and will not remain to see you pulled down. If you go not with me, farewell."

She glided away. Her mustang was back in the dingle, just where she had left him, and she felt that she would be safer upon his back.

On the instant Wilkins decided. Once more the horse of Captain Skull bore double, and with a few bounds was by the side of Catalina.

"You have come, have you?" she asked. "Better had we started sooner."

Like an echo to her words sounded a cry from above:

"Halt!"

Half a dozen of the road-agents were peering down from the bank with weapons at a ready.

"On, now! we must run the risk. If I fall and you live remember I did my best."

She gave her mustang the rein and he shot away, while close in her wake came the two to whose aid she had so strangely devoted herself.

Then there was a crash of fire-arms, as the outlaws saw their prey thus escaping; but the sudden increase of speed had disconcerted their aim, and on flew the fugitives unhurt, and heading straight down Red Cat gulch.

Past Irish Molly's they went like a lightning express, hardly having time to notice that the house was all shut up, and not a sign of a living creature about. There was no time to halt now, for there was no telling how soon the horsemen, warned by the noise of the firing, would return to seek Captain Skull, and strike upon their trail.

For fully half a mile the mad run continued. Then across their path there brawled a stream, small enough now not to check their advance, though at times it swelled into a torrent that swept down like a flood through the gorge into which Red Cat gulch debouched.

Into this stream Catalina led the way squarely; and then, turning to the left made off up the gorge, though the path was too rugged for rapid progress, or even for safety.

"There is just one chance for you," whispered their strange guide. "If you follow me you take it. You cannot go far, if I mistake

not; you must seek concealment rather than flight; and I alone can place you where your presence will never be suspected."

"True. I doubt even if the road was open whether I could stand the journey to the mining camp that it would have been better that I never passed. I would drop by the wayside."

"Keep up your courage and your strength. I came hither this night to save you, and I will; but no more talk. You are far from safety yet."

Wilkins accepted her advice without hesitation, since he not only saw the good sense in it, but he was also in a fair way of soon being unable to do otherwise. He was still buoyed up with hope, still nerved with the nearness of danger; and though he felt a pair of soft arms around him he vowed that they should not have the heavy task of holding him in the saddle.

"The bed of the stream was followed for some distance; then again Catalina turned to the left. She seemed to know all the windings of these mountain paths, following them without a moment's hesitation.

After what seemed an age of wandering she cautioned the two, again, and leaving abruptly the mountain trail began a descent toward a valley that lay beneath.

"Whither do you take us?" whispered Kate, in some alarm. "If daylight finds us wandering here any eye can mark us down. Would it not be better to remain hidden here in the mountains until we are able to proceed on our journey?"

"And starve? No, no! Your pursuers are birds of the night. When daylight comes you could even dare to ride straight into camp; though you would be no safer there than here. It is not as a robber chief that Captain Skull is hunting you down; but as your foe to the death. Even in Tierra Roxo he can make his arm felt. A stray bullet, a thrust with a knife at your back, or a dozen other plans he might try, though his greatest hope I know is, to take you alive."

"And why?"

"That you must guess. I was unlucky enough to hear a conversation, surely never meant for my ears; I dare tell you no more. Now, hush; and whatever you may see or hear speak not again until I give you leave. If you do it may cost you your lives and mine."

Strange enough it seemed to the two, yet positively true, that they were approaching a dwelling house of some extent; but, as they hoped that it was their guide's intention to lead them thither, she turned, and leaving it at one side, made her way cautiously to a cabin, scarcely more than a hut, built against the side of the mountain and at the distance of perhaps half a mile from the larger building.

Halting them near this Catalina sprang from her saddie, and, on foot, advanced toward the cabin, in or about which no signs of life could be noticed.

Yet their movements had not been unseen.

Just as she neared the shadows of the house a dark form stepped out and confronted her, and for a few moments there was a low-toned, earnest conversation. Evidently she was asking some favor that the man, for man it was, was none too willing to grant.

Yet the girl triumphed at length, and coming back she whispered:

"All is well if you be but ordinarily careful. Gomez has agreed to shelter you; as he can do without risk if you keep quiet and within doors. Remember, though, that you are risking two lives besides your own. Indeed, our lives might be in the greater danger. If sickness should come; if fever sets in from that old wound, and Gomez is not leech sufficient to cure you, you must die and give no sign. Remember that. At the first sign of treachery I will hunt you both out and slay you where I find you. Now that you are warned, come. It is not a palace I have led you to, but it is a place of safety which is a great deal better."

The girl spoke harshly, and at length. Evidently she had very little faith in any one, and intended them to understand it. It might have been just as well if she had waited to make her remarks until they got inside. Kate felt the frame around which her arms were clasped tremble, and was just in time to save herself from the fall both would have had had she been taken unawares. Catalina sprang forward, however, and Gomez; and between them they helped Harold Wilkins into the cabin, whither Kate followed. He had not fainted, but a sudden twinge of pain about

his wounded ribs had brought him very near to it.

He was better soon, and Catalina and Gomez stole softly away, leaving the two alone together to talk for a time, and finally sink into the sleep of exhaustion.

Morning dawned, and wore on. While they talked in low tones Catalina came in suddenly.

"Hush," she said. "Gather up those things of yours and take them up yonder ladder to the loft. Should any one come to the cabin remain there quietly until you are actually discovered?"

"What? Is there danger?"

Wilkins moved to the window as he spoke and looked down into the valley. Two horsemen were in sight, riding rapidly toward the ranch, and at the sight he staggered back and stared at Catalina with wild eyes:

"Heaven and earth! You have brought us into the lair of Captain Skull; and yonder he comes."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ENTRAPPED.

CAPTAIN SKULL, if he it was that Wilkins saw from the little opening that did service as a window, never once thought of the cabin of Gomez as a possible refuge for the two fugitives. When he had recovered from the lethargy produced by the bullet grazing his skull he found himself lying on the ground, his horse gone, and three or four of his men standing around him in amazed perplexity. They had heard the shot fired by Harold Wilkins; but waited in the distance. They believed it was from the revolver of Catalina, and had reason to think that it had proved harmless.

A few moments later and there was a rattling volley; and then they hesitated no longer, but dashed back, to find the captain still senseless, and to hear the sounds of flight and pursuit dying away down the gulch.

"So the girl got away with you, captain! She's little, but she bites deep when she sets her teeth. If she had held a shade lower down there'd have been a vacancy made to-night."

"Which, perhaps, you would not have been sorry to see," said the captain, raising himself to a sitting posture, and glaring around in no very friendly way.

"No woman's hand fired the shot, but the bungling work of Leon turned the man he should have taken or slain, loose, to come within an ace of doing for me. The girl was gone long enough before—though she may have come back again; who knows? But why do you linger here? Off in pursuit! Take them alive if you can, but if you cannot, let there be no more nonsense. Slay them *all*! If they get into Hantown it must be known at once, and it will be worth five hundred to the man that slays him there."

Down the gulch went the Skulls, but before long they joined the party under Leon, and found them utterly at fault. It was certain that the fugitives had not stopped at Irish Molly's, for that building had been under surveillance ever since they had dashed by. There was a chance that they were lying somewhere near, concealed in some gulch or ravine, but the theory most generally accepted was that, under Catalina's guidance, they had headed for Tierra Roxo by the circuitous and difficult trail which led from the lower end of Red Cat Gulch. One man threw aside his mask and rode rapidly away, if possible to head them off and make sure of their entrance into town, while the rest continued a fruitless search which lasted far into the morning.

Then some doffed their disguises and others crawled back to their dens, and though watchful eyes were abroad, for a time the hunt seemed to be stayed. At all events it was carried on a very cold scent, since several days passed and still the disappearance of the two was complete, though in that time various things of importance had happened, some of which have already been related, and the history of the rest remains to be told.

At the cry of Harold Wilkins, Catalina looked coolly out of the window, and then turned to him with a smile.

"So that is the redoubtable Captain Skull. Thank you for the information, though I had suspected as much. And as for his nearness—what better could I have done than brought you where your presence would never be suspected? If he finds you I own it will be uncomfortable enough, but he must not find you. In a day or two I hope you will be

strong enough to go on your way, and grateful enough to try and forget and forgive what has happened about Tierra Roxo, where, certainly, you had no business ever to come."

"Girl, who are you? What relation is there between you and these outlaws—for connection of some kind there must be. You are young, you are reckless, and yet you seem honest and true. Dare I trust you? Why should you have come to our aid?"

"You have asked me some such questions before, and I told you I could not answer them. What is it to you? Accept the goods that the gods send you, and never mind whether they are brought by an angel or some one else. I have taken a fancy to aid you, and as long as that lasts you will find me tolerably true."

"But surely you have not lived here always; and you are not alone. Your father—who is he? Your mother? There is not a line in your face that is familiar, yet something tells me that you are one I should know."

"Father! Mother! Come! You are asking too much. I have supposed, sometimes, that yonder man whom you called Captain Skull, was my father; but then, again, I know that he is not. You certainly do not claim the name."

She looked at him sharply, her black eyes gleaming, whether with anger or interest it was hard to tell; and waited for his answer.

He hesitated, shook his head slowly and replied with something of a far-away look:

"No child of mine lives, or ever has lived; why do you ask?"

"No reason need I give for a woman's question, and for yours I'll give you a woman's answer. Why does Captain Skull hate you?"

The question was to the man, but Catalina's eyes turned to the woman, and hardly had she spoken when she saw a crimson flame spread over the face of Kate, who raised her hand with a warning gesture, and gave the answer herself.

"You have chosen to say nothing in regard to yourself; and perhaps you are wise. Grant to us the same privilege. To you we would only tell the truth, and perhaps it is better that that truth should not be told; not here and yet at least. You have served us well. If we leave our bones here nothing will ever convince me that the fault was yours. If we escape, come to us when and where you will, and ask us what you choose; you will not find us ungrateful."

"Promises are readily made; but not so often kept. Perhaps when I remind you of yours I will find you as ungrateful as the balance of the world. Let it be so, though; what matter? I am not serving for pay. All this talk is worse than folly. I came to tell you that you will not see me again for perhaps a day, perhaps longer. When I can see my way clear I will return to you and then you must be ready to leave. Meantime you can think well whether, when you are off and away, it will be worthy of you to do or say anything that can harm me or mine, in name or fortune."

Without waiting for further answer Catalina left the cabin boldly and threw herself into the saddle. There was no one in sight and if there had been she would not have hesitated, for she did not believe that there was any suspicion of the nearness of the two fugitives, and if there had been, in no other way would it be so easily disarmed.

Right to the ranch she went, and at the door was met by a tall, thin-faced woman, whose dark complexion, and black hair and eyes seemed to pronounce her a native Californian, of the Mexican stock. There was something dark, forbidding about the countenance of this woman, although it retained traces of much former beauty, and she looked at the girl with a cold glitter in her eye, as though reading her through and through.

"Ab, Catalina," she said. "You are ever wise, since you are never in the strength of the storm. It is as well for you that you were not here ten minutes ago."

"And why?" asked Catalina coolly, as she relinquished her bridle to a half-clad boy who came running up.

"Pray, what have I done now, that I should want to be in hiding?"

"You know best. Your uncle was away all night, and when he came back the first thing he asked was after you. He swore roundly when they told him you had come in at mid-

night, and went to look if your bed had been slept in. He scarce believed that you had just ridden away. What new wickedness have you been up to? It must be something worse than ever and I doubt if it will soon be forgiven."

"How can I tell of what I am accused now? The pranks of a girl are easily magnified into a crime when the judge is bent on having a culprit. Let those who brought me here take me as they find me; or send me away. Do I want to dwell here?"

"You might dwell in a worse place, and have fewer friends," answered the woman, standing aside to allow Catalina to enter.

"But that you will not believe?"

"Scarcely."

"Willful children that try to have their own way always, sometimes meet with troubles they need not. If you would take advice I should say that while your uncle is in such mood it would be well to beware how you anger him."

"And it would be well for others to take care how they meddle in business that is not their own, or trouble themselves of matters that are my concern; I can protect, and I can avenge myself."

She swept away toward her room unmindful of the fact that the woman held forth her hand as if to stay her until her answer could be heard, and followed protesting that there was a mistake.

The room into which Catalina entered was darkened by closed shutters and she advanced to throw them open: the door behind her suddenly closed and she heard the snap of the bolt in the great lock, that told her that she was a prisoner.

"Ha, ha, my lady! You may protect yourself sure enough, for all the world can neither get in nor out through this door; and the windows are stoutly barred from the outside. How you will avenge yourself remains to be seen. Make yourself comfortable as you can, for out of there you do not come until your uncle returns, and that may be a week. There is a lamp there for you to light, and you shall not starve."

Whether or no she was suspected, Catalina was caged.

CHAPTER XXIV.

COLONEL DASHWOOD TRUMPS A TRICK.

THE two exiles gave one last look in the direction of the camp, and then turned down Red Cat Gulch. Whatever might be the basis of Soft Hand's interest Alabaster Jim's appearance to be purely gratuitous.

"I'm in this drag with you, an' I'm goin' to see you out," was his answer, as Soft Hand called to his mind the haste which he had displayed to get off to the North.

"I've struck a streak o' luck hyar, things is panning out rich, an' fur a pard you're about as good as they make 'em, so I ain't a-growlin'. Only don't you furgit that ther tough work is just beginnin', an' ef I stick, you ain't to throw off."

"Not my name," answered the other shortly. "There's a little matter of saving my life between us, that I'm not going to forget."

"All right, I'll give you a chance at mine some day. An ef we don't stir up some fun at Irish Molly's you kin call me a Dutchman. I feel it in me bones."

It looked as though the bones aforesaid were poor prophets, however, for around the house everything was silent, and in the dim, uncertain light of the early morning it looked desolate and deserted. Contrary to the rule since the strangers had been received, the doors and windows were tightly closed, and, as Alabaster Jim remarked, it appeared as though there might have been a death in the family.

Soft Hand was inclined to take a serious view of the matter. He looked, and he listened. He examined the roadway, and even crept around until he could obtain a view of the rear of the house, if by chance there might be any one lurking there.

Nothing else suspicious could be seen, yet he was not satisfied.

"See here," he said. "If there has been any trouble here and that Irishwoman has turned her shanty into a fort she may let drive first and talk to us afterward if she sees us coming in force; I had better go on ahead and see what's the lay-out. She's as handy with

the pistols, I've heard, as with her tongue, and I tell you that's saying a good deal."

"Drive on, but ef thar's fun save a leetle till I kin up."

So leaving Alabaster Jim at some little distance from the house, Soft Hand marched boldly up to the door and gave a thundering knock, to which there was no response. Again he beat a tattoo with his knuckles, and waited for some sign from within; which did not come.

"No use to waste time," he muttered. "If there was going to be shooting the frolic would have begun. Here goes."

Shoulder forward he flung himself against the door, which creaked under the attack, but did not yield.

Once more he threw his weight against the stout boards, and this time, with a crash that rattled through the old house, the door flew back, and the way was open. In fact he followed the door in with a rush that was as involuntary as it was rapid.

"By George! they've skipped the ranch, or some one's taken them in from the damp. There's no one here."

The little stream of misty light that crawled in through the open door hardly showed him the shadows. He strode across the room and casting up a heavy bar was about to throw open the shutter.

At that instant a stream of dark forms, without even a whisper of warning, pounced out upon him.

First, from a closet close at hand, a little, tough, wiry Mexican bounded out, cat-like, and sprung upon his back; clinging fast with both arms around him, then two crawled out from under the bed, one dropped down from the loft above, and two more dashed through the partition door, crying:

"Give it up, pard; we'll have you dead or alive!"

And the five bounded to the assistance of the little Mexican, the foremost man carrying a pair of glittering handcuffs.

Six on one, and no time or chance to use his weapons. It looked as though they had him beyond a doubt. Certainly they ought to be able to dispose of any ordinary man before Alabaster Jim could come to the rescue, even if he heard the noise of the fray.

But Soft Hand did not even attempt to draw his revolvers. Up and behind him he threw his hands the moment the Mexican settled on his back. Then he bent forward, stooping low down with a sudden jerk, and up in the air went the Mexican, and moved partly by the shock and partly by the powerful hands of the bronze-bearded man he dropped right in front of Soft Hand who as instantly changed his gripe and catching him up as though he was a feather, whirled him swiftly around his head.

Down went two men, stricken to the floor by this novel bludgeon, while the remaining three sprung back, but were unable to escape the human catapult. With another swing Soft Hand hurled at them the body of the Mexican, and leveling one more he sprung forward, and catching, by the throat, the other two, who were too dumfounded to organize resistance, he tore them from the floor and flung them in a heap upon their comrades.

At the same time Alabaster Jim came dashing into the room, a pistol in either hand.

"I've got 'em, James," said Soft Hand, coolly, as he stooped and snapped the handcuffs on the wrists of two, linking them together, and then drew his revolvers. "I've got 'em; but saints or angels couldn't tell what we're to do with 'em. It would be butchery to cut their throats; and they're dangerous cattle to let go. As they're all of them masked I judge they're part of Captain Skull's gang."

"A purty lookin' set they are. I don't want 'em either, I'll tell you, pard. This shanty ain't wuth much, an' ther owner won't have much use for it, fur I jedge they've hed to plant her afore they could set up shop hyar fur themselves. Ther best plan would be to tie 'em in a heap, lock up ther doors an' winders, an' burn up ranch, road-agents an' all together."

He might well have been in very earnest, so soberly did he make the proposition, and while he spoke he was quietly removing the arms from the belts of the prisoners, of whom several were senseless, and the rest, half stunned, were covered by Soft Hand's revolvers.

"That seems somewhat bloodthirsty; but we'll tie them up and see what damage they've done before we make up our minds."

Without much trouble they succeeded in

binding their prisoners, and then rummaged the house; but not a sign did they find of Harold Wilkins or Kate, and even Irish Molly had disappeared and left no trace.

"Bad work byar, and I'll bet you ther party in thar knows more about it than we do. Let's shake 'em up, an' have em out one at a time. I reckon we kin git su'thin' outer 'em ef we try."

So, one after the other, the six were overhauled, and some were stupid, and some knew nothing, or pretended to know nothing, and it was only when they had come to the last one that they opened up a mine of information.

He had been one of the party who had been sent by Captain Skull to approach the house from below, so he was able to tell how Wilkins had escaped, and further pursuit had proved unavailing.

"But what's become of them now?" asked Soft Hand sharply. "And where is the Irish woman? She was rough and ready, but she was worth a hundred such cattle as these in there."

"Them two made a through run, fur not a sign nor sound on 'em er Molly bez ther captain found; an' ther gal thet helped 'em off won't tell. Irish Molly don't know much, but they've got her under the pump; an' we war put hyar to ketch you ef you come."

"But this Catalina, who, you say, must have guided them off. Where is she now; and who is she?"

"I reckon the captain himself don't know just who she is, from the way he talks, though he's been mighty kind to her till she cut up this shine. He's got her shut up in his ranch now; an' ef she ain't mighty careful she'll come out feet foremost."

"Good! We have some trail at last," said Soft Hand, in a decided tone. "Now tell us where this ranch is and you'll come out right in the end."

"You go—" began the outlaw, but just then a harsh voice broke in:

"This frolic has lasted long enough. Throw up your hands and surrender!"

Colonel Dashwood had reorganized his fugitive lynchers and come out from Hangtown.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW THEY HELD THE RANCH.

SOFTLY enough marched Colonel Dashwood and his doughty warriors. Heartily ashamed of their sudden, senseless panic, the latter, after being soundly rated for their cowardice by the colonel, who met them on their way to Tierra Roxo, were easily persuaded to follow him back; in fact, it would be almost a mistake to say he persuaded them, since he said follow and they followed. As they came near the ranch they observed more and more caution, and finally crept up on the amateur judges, who were putting the captured agents through a course of examination.

One slight mistake they made; they approached in a body. If they could have risen from all sides at once, they might have caught the two at a disadvantage. As it was, quietly though they had come, Alabaster Jim recognized their presence just an instant before the colonel spoke, and acted for the emergency. He and his partner threw up each a hand; but they held navy sixes, and at the same time he held up the prisoner as a barricade, shouting to Soft Hand:

"Inter ther door, pard; I've got him lined an' he can't hit me. We'll hold this ranch, er bu'st a-tryin'."

At the first words the man from Cinnabar sprung for the house. That was perhaps their only chance, and he wasted no time in discussing what would follow.

The rapid movements of the two disconcerted the colonel, and as he had given strict orders not to fire until he gave the word, the retreat was made without eliciting a volley.

"Now, kunnel, we've got the dead medicine on you. By this time my pard bez ther drop on yer, an' if I miss you kin pile up all yer duckats that he won't. Hold on till I git under kiver, an' then we'll talk reason to yer."

Over the shoulder of the terrified man, who appeared like an infant in his arms, twinkled the eyes of the sport, and the deadly tube that looked right into the colonel's eyes never wavered. The latter might shoot, but it was an even chance that he hit the helpless prison-

er who was being used as a shield; and at the first discharge of a weapon it was pretty certain that Soft Hand, from some invisible station in the house would attend to him. So the contemplated rush was checked, and Alabaster Jim quietly stepped back through the open doorway.

"Ther's nothin' like doin' things yerself, kunnel; then yer sure they're done right. I tell yer ef yer hedn't been hyar thar might 'a' bin dreadful work. Now, ef you know what's healthy, you'll jist git right back to Hangtown, you an' yer crowd, an' leave us to settle our own affairs. Ef you won't listen to that, let's hear what you've got to say."

Out from a window there was thrust a white flag, and the way was open for a parley.

So the colonel seemed to think, for, without any hesitation, he moved a few steps nearer; while Jim appeared at the window. Both of them held their hands down.

"You'll hard'y fire after you've hung up a flag of truce, and so I'll risk telling you a little plain truth. We've come out after you two, and we mean to have you, so you may as well give in at first as at last. There are only two of you in there, and there are a dozen of us here."

"Oh, ho! yer figgerin' too fast. Thar's eight on us hyar, an' kill one kill all. We'll all waltz up ther flume together. Ef you want us, come an' take us; an' ther first dead man will be Colonel Dashwood, unless ther rest are fools enough to let you push 'em on ahead."

"You can't be on all sides of the house at once, and if some of us do suffer the rest are bound to get in when we make a charge."

"I don't see it that way. We'll salivate every last soul on one side ov ther house, an' then be ready fur ther balance ez they come. We're ducks, we-be; regular roosters, trimmed and heeled."

"But even if we can't pick you off, or drive you out, you can't hold out forever, and we'll sit down in siege for a month but what we'll have you."

"An' what'll we be doin'?" An' how yer goin' to fix it about ther other six? You'll hand in ther loaves and fishes fur them, an' in course we'll hand 'em over, an' starve ourselves. That's our style, every time."

"Your prisoners, as you call them, must starve with you. What have I to do with them? I don't know who they are, and don't care; but if six men let two corral them they must be no account frauds anyhow, and the sooner they're gone the better. But if any harm comes to them, beware. When we set fire to the old stable I fancy you will be glad enough to crawl out, and surrender."

"An' s'pose we do, then what?"

"Well, that trial in town was a farce. Besides, there have been developments. We want you this time. It will be as the court decides."

"You're the court, an' yer twelve men ther jury. Thank you, I don't just guess we will. When we get tired in hyar we'll hang yer six friends hyar outer ther winders, an' move on. I'll make you an offer, though. There's been some trouble between us an' I'm the best man. Ef yer acn't believe it draw yer friends off an' I'll kim out an' fight you fur love er money on yer own heels or with ther gifts."

Once more Alabaster Jim challenged the colonel to single combat; and once more the offer was declined. The colonel wanted no duel in his; and yet it could hardly be lack of nerve since he had had more than one single encounter in his time, and his private graveyard was larger than any other two in Tierra Roxo.

"Fall back there and let the fun begin!"

In went the white flag, and back jumped Alabaster Jim, who had no idea of allowing any one a chance for a snap shot at him; while the colonel and his men, at long pistol range, put their heads together, and seemed to be getting ready for a rush.

"I'm sorry fur you fellers," added Jim, addressing his prisoners. "I wouldn't mind making a swop of it, but you heard what ther kunnel said. I'm goin' to place yer whar you'll do most good, an ef yer don't stay whar I put yer thar'll be about five ov yer plugged wuss ner any bad molar ever seen."

The five had remained altogether silent during the parleying.

Some howled and some swore, and the only one of the half-dozen who did not make more or less of a demonstration with his heels was the one who had served as shield and buckler.

He rolled into a corner, and had nothing to say, possessing himself with the hope that he would be allowed to remain there, unnoticed.

At the address of Alabaster Jim the rest became silent. They might be placed in various ways, any of which would be uncomfortable and dangerous, and they were in an agony to see what was to come.

They did not have to wait long, since one after another the five were piled up in a heap against the closed but shattered door, through the wide cracks of which they could plainly be seen by the men without.

About the time he had made this arrangement Soft Hand came sliding down from above, where he had leen to take a sly look at things. He seemed in a remarkably good humor for one of two that was in for a fight to the death against a dozen.

"Fun enough, here, James? Eh?"

"Things is bloomin'; but it does look like a slaughter to massacre all them innercents."

"I'm not caring for the slaughter; what I do care is getting the funeral ahead of the hearse. It's bad enough now, but if we take them all in, Hangtown may rise on its combined ear for fear we'll depopulate it; and I want to go back there."

"So do I. I've got to, er lose my cache."

"Besides, though we could easy stand them all off, that wouldn't be helping Wilkins any, and I'm going to carry my contract through with him."

"Then how you going to work it? If we break kiver they're bound to run us down, an' ef we stay hyar—they're comin' fur us now."

"I think we have them anyhow. I've been taking a view of things, and it's just pig luck in our favor. There's six or seven mustangs corraled just below; belong to ther gang we caught in here I suppose. There's one man watching them, and two more behind the ranch watching us. We'll open fire in front, for they are going to come for us now, and then skip out of the back window, saving the two as we go along, and break for the horses. We may be hung afterwards for horse-thieves, but I'll bet rocks on it that we have a ride today."

"Now you're shoutin', pard. We'll stam-pede that corral, an' git. Ef they take us then, they orter, that's all. Look out!"

The consultation appeared to be over. There were only two sides of the ranch that were open to immediate entrance, the front and rear; and the doors and windows there were so stout that the first rush might not carry them, and while they were being forced there was no telling how many of the attacking party would be picked off.

The ends of the house, it seemed, might be approached in safety, unless it should turn out that there were some hidden loop-holes; and it appeared that they had decided to adopt the plan already hinted at, and fire the house. Of course, now that he had his men warmed up to their work, and as they were armed with shot guns and rifles, Colonel Dashwood had no doubt but that if he could get the two out of cover he could at least kill them, though he would far rather have them surrender. And he had decided that no matter what use was made of the prisoners there should be no let up, though, as they were so near the door there was little danger but what they could be rescued before the flames reached them.

The attack began.

From every side there came spattering bullets, and yells; but the two were not deceived. Something else was on foot; the shots were a blind. The eyes of the colonel and his men would turn in one direction, though four shots fired in rapid succession from the front were something of a diversion.

Then, almost instantly, the shutter of the window in the rear flew open, two shots wounded the two men on guard there, and out leaped Soft Hand, followed by Alabaster Jim. A moment or two would decide the matter now, but they did not mind the risk as much as the idea of running away, though they let no grass grow under their feet.

The unexpected appearance almost bewildered the besiegers, who had made up their mind it was to be a fight to the death, and really did not see them until they were some distance away. Then they let fly a rattling volley and opened out on the trail in full chorus; but they were a little too late. There was seen another shot, another wounded man, the rattle and clatter of horses' hoofs, and the two were away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

VICTOR PAGE'S LITTLE PLOT.

"THERE was more luck than judgment in that little suck operation," remarked Soft Hand, when they could no longer hear even the "thirr" of the spent bullets. "We've got a fine drove of horses, it's a pity to see 'em go to waste, and I don't know that there's anything for us to do but to strike south and sell out. They'll run us down, sure, if we stay fooling around here. Fact is, now that we're on the road, things don't look as clear as they did when I was planning how to get out of that cursed trap."

"Pears to me, pard, you're one ez can't bear prosperity. What's the trouble now? Gimme a toothful of grub, fur which I'll own up I'm sufferin', an' I'll play hide an' go seek with those chaps fur a week. Why, I know this country, all over, an' it's the purtiest you ever rid over."

"Do you know enough of it to tell where this Captain Skull's ranch is?"

Alabaster Jim looked at the other with a sly twinkle in his eye!

"Answer yer own connundrum, an' I'll give yer another to tackle onto it. What do yer think ov this Kunnel Dashwood anyhow?"

"I think what you do," burst out Soft Hand, "and I wonder I didn't see it sooner. I may be wrong, but I'd risk a thousand on it. He and Captain Skull are one."

"Right you are, fur rocks, pard, fur rocks. Down in Hangtown, don't you see, they'll know whar to locate ther kunnel, an' to Hangtown we'll strike and git posted. The two is playin' it ag'in' ther field; but we'll hold our own end up, an' no flinchin'."

Soft Hand looked a little dubious over the idea of venturing into Tierra Roxo.

"They had a rope twisted fer my neck there last night, and like as not they'll be fools enough there yet to try to put it on."

"Not if we get in afore ther kunnel, ez we will. Ef they do, we'll hev to sack the town, that's all. You needn't show up either. Jist be ready outside to ride in ef you hear this frolic begin, an' I'll risk it alone. I kin take yer there in ther shake ov a buck's tail, an' we'll drop what we don't want of these critters on ther way goin'."

It seemed like running a great deal of risk; but our two adventurers knew very well that if they wasted time searching about in an aimless way the danger they were in would be more than doubled, and if they did not intend to leave the neighborhood—as they certainly did not—Tierra Roxo, by daylight, might not prove as unhealthy as they suspected. Still they understood that they had to hold their own against the outlaws in the hills, and the nominally honest men in the town, without knowing how far the two were identical.

Nevertheless, for Tierra Roxo they started, where their presence was certainly not expected.

In fact the affair of the night before was not such a very great ripple on the life of Hangtown as one might expect. The lynch court seemed like a sudden fury; but it had been more or less carefully worked up. There were a good many who went into it in a very cold-blooded sort of a way, then there were several score who drifted along with the crowd, and then there were a great many more who either were not there, or if they were, took no stock in the affair.

Of course it was a subject of discourse the next morning, and the lame ending elicited as much laughter as anything else, though the remarks made about the counsel for the prisoner were not altogether flattering. Suspicion did not exactly point at him, but people wondered who he was, and what he was doing, and before long his investments were known and his future intentions canvassed.

On his return to the Seven Angels, Varna received him with some scorn.

"Between you and that colonel you managed to have him slip clear nicely. What are such men as you worth?"

"My dear," he answered, in conciliating tones, "I will admit that I was a little off color last night, hardly up to the standard; but the best man has his weak hours, and I hope mine are over for a time. There is something more behind it all than you see, so don't complain until the affair is finished."

"What can there be? The two men are off and away; and, once warned that we are on his trail, when do you expect to see Pierre Redette again?"

"My dear, he is not running away from us, rest assured. It is only his utter carelessness that makes him refuse to strike back. This colonel, for some reason of his own, chose to be my friend, and saved Redette to save me. There might have been some ugly questions asked if things had not gone as they did."

"You cannot win if you are afraid to put up stakes. Why not risk all?"

"Because it is better this way. When I became involved the plan was changed. A dozen men were sent to the north, and when morning dawns there will be two corpses hanging by the side of the trail."

"A dozen men to take those two! Well, they will not do it. He will escape. Who told you of this plan?"

"This Colonel Dashwood. He just whispered a few words in my ear as we passed."

"And did he say nothing else?"

"One word; and that word has troubled me."

"Why? what was it?"

"Halves."

"Then he knows more than we thought any living being did except ourselves. Oh, I tell you, this game is no longer in our own hands. Could it have been he who placed us on this scent? He is a dangerous man. Who is he? Have you been letting your tongue wag in his presence; has he drawn anything out of you?"

"He is a stock-raiser, and has mining interests here; in fact, he almost runs this town. That is all I know of him. Save Pedro and his villains, who only half did their work, I have talked to no one of anything but mining schemes and the future of Tierra Roxo. There is no use to borrow trouble. If he chooses to play into our hand, let him. When the work is done, we can easily get rid of him, though I will own I would sooner not have him to settle with."

"Very well. If he meddles it will be at his own risk. We will stay here until we learn more of what has happened, or will happen. I am enlisted for the war; see that you fail me not."

"And yet is there not a possibility that we might have been mistaken? Suppose we are even on the wrong trail?"

The woman gave him a glance of scorn, and made no answer. They were not working altogether smoothly.

"Whoever he may be this colonel is working in our interests now; and if we lose our revenge remember our other ends will be just as certainly secured. The man will die to-night."

Victor Page added this in a positive tone; but just as positively Varna answered him:

"And I say he will not, and when the end proves my words good I will tell you of it."

And tell him of it she did, for that very day, as they stood upon the porch of the Seven Angels, down the street, side by side, as large as life, and very wide awake, came the Pistol Pards. They seemed utterly unconscious that their re-entrance would cause any flurry in the camp; and they steered their course straight for Michael Mitchell's hotel.

Victor, at the sight, drew back a little, utterly amazed, while Varna stood erect, with eyes flashing full with hate, as Soft Hand brushed past them, and went in to seek Mitchell, from whom he deemed he could best obtain the information that he was after. He wanted to talk with a man that would not run and tell as soon as he was out of town.

"Cut an' kim again, pard," said Alabaster Jim, as he lingered at the door. "Couldn't think ov leavin' Hangtown thout sayin' good-by to our friends. We shook hands with a dozen er more ov 'em that kim out ez a depuration to sing farewell; but that warn't enough. We've kim to shake with the hull town."

The words were spoken at Victor, but he gave no reply, wheeling silently, and following Varna into the house.

He was angry enough, mad enough to answer bitterly; but the thought struck him to turn his wrath to some account.

It happened that he met a boy in the hall, one of the servants attached to the house. With him he had a few words, and then ascended to his room.

"It is a chance," he muttered to himself, "and as Varna says, if you don't bet you can't win. If he takes it—good-by, Mr. Redette."

He hardly counted on the promptness with which the invited chances would present themselves. He had scarcely begun to tell to Varna what he had done, when there was a

quick step without, a sharp knock at the door, which, without waiting for his answer, flew open, and Soft Hand glided into the room.

"You sent for me; I am here; what do you want?"

As he entered, the back of Page was toward him. As he spoke to Varna, Victor had been fingering his revolver in nervous anticipation. With lightning quickness he wheeled with upraised hand, and with muzzle pointed full at the breast of the man from Cinnabar.

"Curse you, to kill you! You have come to your doom!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

PAGE'S PLOT PROVES A FAILURE.

THE idea had struck Victor Page that, as this Soft Hand had been adjudged a public outlaw, and had been warned away from the camp, if he inveigled him into the passages of the house and shot him on sight, when no one else was by to see the manner of his taking off, that little would be said and nothing done about it. He had had enough of tools, that always turned out too dull for the work required, and now, he made up his mind, he would do his own work.

Of course he did not intend to give the bronze-bearded man any chance. It was not satisfaction but certainty that he was after. He calculated on having his revolver out and aimed, and to take him as he came up to the door. He had not counted on Varna's presence; though that would hardly make any difference. He had his revolver in his hand, and at the sound of the voice he wheeled, with the words given in the previous chapter.

There was no earthly way by which Soft Hand could help himself, for though his hand was at his belt and he was not altogether taken by surprise, the muzzle was directly at him before he could guess what was coming.

Nevertheless he neither winced nor dodged.

"I guess not," he said, quietly. "I've heard such talk before now, and it was all wind, for I'm here yet. Glad to see you and Mrs. Redette so lively, though. Had a good night's rest again, no bad dreams?"

"If you've any prayers to say, say them now: in another minute you die."

"Not very likely. While you've been fooling round I've been taking the drop from you. Move your thumb toward the hammer of that revolver and I'll drill you. Now go on and let's hear what you've got to say for yourself."

It was just as Soft Hand said. He had not attempted to draw the weapon on which his hand rested but had swung the muzzle around, holster and all, and the jarring click of the raised hammer accompanied his words. With the pistol held close at his waist there was hardly a chance that he would miss if he fired.

Varna's quick eye took in the position even before Soft Hand spoke. She was full of a bad nerve of her own, and she believed that she hated this man with more than a passing hatred. Toward her breast stole her hand, for there she carried a weapon, small but at such close quarters reliable enough.

But the man noted that motion too.

"Excuse me, miss, or madam if you choose, but I wouldn't. I'd pull on him right off, and when you were left alone you wouldn't make a good sized mouthful."

"Give in, Victor," she said quietly. "Fate seems against us. Perhaps it is as well, for it was a desperate chance. Now that you have brought him hither I would ask him a question or two. He may answer them now though he refused before."

"Ask, then. I am half inclined to throw away the hatchet and run for it. Such luck, backed by such skill, it is useless to fight against."

He spoke gloomily, and as if thoroughly in earnest, but he still held his hand outstretched. It was dangerous to move it, for he knew that if there was any mistake made about his intentions there would follow sudden disaster.

The man from Cinnabar scarcely put much faith in his sincerity for an incredulous smile curled his lip.

"I've heard that kind of talk, but it generally brought more sting than honey. Just drop the muzzle of that revolver, take the barrel by the other hand and pass it over. Then this court will be open for business."

For the second time in his Hangtown experience Page suffered himself to be disarmed.

"Now, say it sharp. What is wanted?"

"My child," said Varna, and for the first time there crept a softer tone into her voice. "Where is she; who is she? Shall I ever see her again?"

"I'm sorry, miss; but I don't keep much account of children. I will tell you something, that maybe you don't know. This Colonel Dashwood, that has been mixing in our affairs has another name and it's Captain Skull. If that don't seem to stir you up any, make it Allan Page and you won't be far wrong."

"Allan Page! How dare you mix the name of my dead brother up with a mining-town gambler, and a captain of road-agents?"

"That's the question. It does seem rough; but Allan Page it is. I thought I'd tell you so you could give him a little caution. I'm afraid his game is about played. There are eyes on him. Good-morning. Don't try any games on me, and I'll see you again. I'm pressed, just now, for time."

With an easy bow he cast the revolver on the bed and turning walked out and away, without ever once looking back.

When he was fairly gone the two drew a long breath, for judging him by themselves it was only when his last footstep sounded faintly in the hall that they felt assured that he would not turn and rend them.

"He has Satan's own luck!" at length whispered Page.

"Yes! Can we hope to ever see it change?"

"Can we? Yes, we must, we will! Yet this is no place for us. For all his quiet ways he must be more than mortal if he does not, sooner or later, seek his revenge. When he does strike it will be the crashing of a thunder-bolt."

"You are right there; yet I would sooner fight than flee. More than once we have held his life in the hollows of our hands, and we stopped to dally with him. We do not know that he is invulnerable, because we have never struck him a solid blow. And it is worth our while to succeed. Perhaps even he may begin to fear for the future. Why else should he have told us so foul a lie?"

"Bah! Don't be so indignant. It cannot harm the shade of the departed; and I cannot see that we are in so much better business."

"You do not for a moment believe? And yet—truly there was a strange mystery there. I was mad enough to give this Captain Skull a few truths in my very recklessness."

"And if he be Colonel Dashwood then he has no little hold on us."

"And if he is Allan?"

"Hush! We know the truth only too well. It is too late to swerve from our course. We must find out what this man is going to do now and lay our plans accordingly."

But with all their shrewdness the two plotters hardly supposed that Soft Hand and his ally were heading in a bee-line for the ranch of Colonel Dashwood.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COLONEL DASHWOOD DEFINES HIS POSITION.

It had not required a great deal of ingenuity to entice Catalina into the trap; but once she was there its jaws held very tight, and even a Baron Trench might have been puzzled to get out very speedily with the means she had at her command.

The girl had little fear for her own safety. Eve Ramon, the Mexican woman who had sprung the lock upon her, hated her very heartily, she knew; but she would not be allowed to work her will unquestioned, and sooner or later she believed she would be released, even though she had befriended and saved those who were her uncle's aversion.

Although she did not, at the time, let it appear, the positive recognition of her uncle as Captain Skull gave her more painful matter for reflection than even her own captivity. She was by no means passionately attached to him, for their life together had been one of much jangling; she knew that he was no saint, and in her way she was careless enough, reckless enough herself; but to be the niece of a bandit and in seeming league with highwaymen was more than her proud spirit could brook. She was not altogether sorry to be alone with her certainties, a suspicion of which had more than once crossed her mind, especially since she had overheard a conversation certainly not intended for her ears. She threw herself on the

bed with her head resting on her arms, and considered the problem of her future.

Over and beyond her uncle's double role she had grave matter for reflection; and the pair that she had succored were strangely prominent in all her thoughts.

The day wore on. When she began to fairly feel the gnawings of hunger, Eve Ramon appeared on the outside of the door, bearing a meal.

"Senorita, you are not to starve unless you wish to. I have your dinner here and will hand it in to you if you swear to me to make no attempt to harm me or to escape, but to remain in the further corner of the room until I have closed the door again."

It was a natural precaution, but Catalina felt somewhat disappointed since she had laid her plans for a rush.

There was no chance to argue the question, and as she knew that she would be all the better and stronger for the meal, and none the worse off for the promise she gave it for without much hesitation.

"Wait a moment, Eve," she said, as the woman placed her tray upon the table and turned to leave the room. "Such things as this are never done without a reason; tell me what is in the wind now?"

"Something that should have been thought of long ago if I had had my will; and I told it pretty clearly to your uncle. You are in the way and as no one here wants to wring your pretty neck they talk of providing some one to do it for them if it should be needed."

"And so they would murder me. Beware!"

"No murder, though sometimes that would be the better for choice. They mean to give you a husband."

Catalina's eyes flashed with anger.

"A husband! They must be mad. Who have I seen here with whom I would mate? A woman must be won; and who has ever come here to woo? Why, woman, I have been shut up here as in a living tomb, from which I could only wander out as a corpse or a ghost, to look upon a strange world."

"The wooer has seen you all the same, and he is a brave young fellow, trust me for that. When he comes, with your uncle and the priest, you will hardly say him nay. And if you do it will not make much difference."

"You are speaking falsely," exclaimed the girl passionately. "Because I have gone counter to Colonel Dashwood's wishes, and interfered between him and his revenge I am shut up here, and such tales are told me for punishment. When will this outrage be?"

"It is true enough! In three days."

"One question more, and a strange one it is for an expectant bride; who may be the chosen man?"

"Leon Cerrado."

"The worthless vagabond! what service can he have done that he dares claim me as his reward? Or is it upon him that I am forced, to suit the hand of this scheming, treacherous, wicked uncle of mine? The half-dozen times that his glittering, beady little eyes met mine, I had a strange temptation to crush him as though he was a snake. Pity that I had not done so! His soft words poisoned me. I hated him from the first, and told him so."

"You mistake. Leon Cerrado is one that many a senorita would be too happy to win. He is young and handsome, and in Mexico has a great ranch. True, he had to fly from there, but that is all right now. He goes back soon, and will take with him his wife. You have been a great trouble to your uncle, you will trouble him no more."

"That will do. You may go now. I have nothing more that I would ask you."

It was a temptation, perhaps, but Catalina had pledged her word. She made no movement to interfere, and Eve left the room, unmolested.

When once more alone, Catalina considered the story, and for the very reason that it had such an ugly look, she was inclined to believe in the truth of it; though why Eve had revealed the plot, unless instructed to prepare her for what was to come, she could not understand.

It was probable enough, for this Leon Cerrado was a young man of whom she had seen some little, since, more than once, he had come to see her uncle, and had lingered to talk to her. With the knowledge that she had lately gained, it was not hard to believe that he was one of the band of Skulls. Though she was somewhat indebted to Dashwood for a careless

kindness in the past, yet she had good reason, in the variable nature of her treatment, to know that if she crossed him too far, she could expect nothing from his mercy.

Perhaps she had gone a step beyond the line in her late interference; but she vowed that she would not regret it, and would turn all her energies toward escape.

But, when she came to look around, she found that she was about as well secured as if she had been in any jail in Christendom. She had her pistols for defense, but they could help her little to clear the way for their use. Even then she lost, for Eve, either being cautioned or thinking that they were not safe things for her to have, the next time she came coolly told her that unless she gave them up, she would have to do without food or drink until they relieved her of the care of her prisoner.

There was some dispute about this, but in the end Eve triumphed, and the girl waited in her prison for the crisis that was none too far off.

When the hours of day and night had gone around with a weary sameness, until Catalina was almost crazed with the monotony, and the thoughts of what was to come and the two prisoners in the cabin of Gomez, the door flew open and in stalked Colonel Dashwood.

He had not been at all seriously injured; but the hard usage received of late had not added to his beauty, and it looked as though, if he met a few more men that he was hunting for, his head would be more bandage than cranium. As she looked up into his face, uncertain whether to be glad or distrustful, she thought she had never seen it more forbidding.

He threw himself into a chair and looked at her with a cold, calculating glance.

"Well, girl, are you ready? Eve says she has told you of my intentions."

"Eve has been babbling, but certainly I would believe no such story as that which she told."

"You may as well believe it, for it is the truth. I have been a fool to burden myself with such an ungrateful chit so long. No matter what my idea was when I first took you in, I have given it up and must make some other disposition of you before you work me a mischief that cannot be undone. As the wife of Leon Cerrado I fancy you will be out of harm's way. It must be either that or something else; and I hate to kill you."

"Do you think that I will submit to such an outrage? Have I nothing at all to say in the matter?"

"Very little, my dear. The facts are, I took you as a child, brought you up, fed and clothed you, educated you, and asked little or nothing in return. I thought you had some gratitude, even if your affection had not been awakened. Yet the first time you get a fair opportunity you set yourself against me, threaten my life, and if I, thinking that my ends were accomplished, had not seemingly yielded, I verily believe that you would have slain me where I sat. It is true I admired your courage on several other occasions, but that did not strike me so near at home. This came near costing me my life. It shows, moreover, that you cannot be controlled and that I need never expect anything from you."

"Very well, let me go then and I trouble you no more. I have never asked anything at your hand, and now I never will."

"Thank you, but that does not suit. It is because I do not want to slay you that I turn you over to Leon, who adores you, and will make a proper husband no doubt."

"And do you really suppose that you can break my spirit so that I will give my consent to such a villainy. You shall never force me to give my consent if I die for it."

"Your consent will not be at all needful. The truth is the marriage part is rather an afterthought. I was going to send you out of the way anyhow, and Leon spoke."

"About how long, then, do you think Leon Cerrado will live after you attempt to put such plot in operation? If I have learned anything in this half savage life I have been leading it is to handle my weapons. I will kill him like a dog; and no one knows better that I will do it than yourself."

"Perhaps; but we will put it to the test. I thought it might be as well to warn you that the time was close at hand and caution you that any resistance will only make a disgraceful scene without benefit to any one. You hardly want to enter the matrimonial state

bound and gagged, as you certainly will if you will go no other way."

"And think you that any such mummery will be binding; that any priest or preacher will take part in it?"

"You will find a hard heart under a gown now and then as well as under a mining shirt. The priest that we have provided will hear nothing but the chink of eagles. Make up your mind that there is no escape. I have had my experience with you; and you may write it down in your book that I never forget and never forgive. You have sinned, and that without remedy."

"And write it down in yours then that for once you have been defied by one who cares nothing for your remembrance and will never ask your forgiveness. Ring up your curtain for a farce; by the heaven above us it shall fall on a tragedy! His funeral, or yours, or mine will follow! I defy you—do your worst."

She drew herself up to her full height; and looked at him in a proud fury that lent to her face a deadly beauty. He stared at her a moment, raised his hand as though to strike her and then abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WEDDING BELLS.

CATALINA had some vague hope that she might be left to herself at least until the hour when the mockery of a rite was to be performed, but she found that she was mistaken. She had one more visitor, in the shape of Leon Cerrado himself.

He was really by no means an ill-looking fellow, and the wonder was that she had not taken a liking to him. His dark, fervent face would have won many another woman; but it was not, perhaps, enough in contrast with her own. At sight of him standing in the doorway, full of life and strength, one thought flashed across her mind.

What a pity it was that soon she would have to kill this man!

For no other way of escape seemed open; and so, to this, she had made up her mind.

He glided into the room, with an easy, careless grace.

"Pardon me, senorita, but I came to see if nothing I could say would bring thee a less unwilling bride. Thou hast scorned me indeed but let that be forgotten. None could more truly love thee."

"And in the world you cannot find one who more fully despises you. Beware that my disgust does not turn to hatred!"

"To hatred, senorita! Why shouldst thou hate one who adores thee?"

"Out on thee and thy adoration! I tell you, Leon Cerrado, that when I have to say nay twice the second time it is done with something more solid than a word. In following me you are going straight to your death."

She stood up before them—for Colonel Dashwood leaned carelessly against the doorway and watched the interview with a scowl that sometimes almost broke into a sneer. In her unfeminine yet jaunty garb she was too handsome for a boy, yet looked strangely unlike the woman to win a man in the teeth of the deadly danger she vowed him. There was the ring of an oath in her voice, and the straight, slender finger she pointed at Leon was as unwavering as though fashioned of steel.

"Death let it be," he answered coolly. "I thought perhaps I could find you willing to lend an ear to what I would have said; but I was wrong and the captain was right. We will quarrel no more now; there will be plenty of time afterward. Good-by, for a little while."

"Go then, coward, villain, robber, assassin! I will parley no more with you. Henceforth I will be silent—until I can act. Then, beware!"

"You might as well have taken my word for it," said the colonel, as the two strode away. "She is like an unbroken colt. Shouting does no good. She must feel the cool, steady hand of power. She may plunge, then, for a while; but sooner or later she will give in."

"I've had my warning though, and I'd sooner take it from her red lips than trust to yours. I might not have believed until it was too late."

"You can believe her," said the colonel, dryly. "While that mood lasts I wouldn't give a snap for your life if she held it in her hands. See that she does not."

"Trust me for that. My fear is Father Bartolome may find his conscience and give us the skip."

"Ha, ha! He is as safe as gold, pistols and good whisky can make him: between the three you will find him very reliable. He will be here to-night."

"I wish he and night were here then. No word yet of the two demons; I wonder you gave up the chase. The man that oaks you seldom slips clear in the end."

"Nor shall these. A dozen are on their track. But it is only a question of time. They are here, like wolves around a bait. Let them alone and they will crawl in to their doom. Before I leave here I will have settled with them, in full."

Night came on soon enough. When it had grown dark, and the tread of approaching horsemen had resounded below, and all things were set and appointed, the colonel went by himself to Catalina's room.

"Girl," he said, "you know me, or should. I have a word of warning. There will not be a soul here to-night I would not trust with my life. You can have your choice between life and death. Submit, or you will die. At the first unseemly motion my hand shall send the shot that shall wing your death. Come, and remember this is no idle threat."

"Her dry lips refused to give any answer; and just as she was, in her black velvet jacket, with her long hair trailing around her in a now tangled, unkempt mass, her eyes gleaming, her cheeks white with waiting and confinement, he caught her firmly by the arm and led her away."

In the room half a dozen persons were assembled.

Eve was there, with malicious satisfaction in her face; the witnesses were there, with faces that were cruelly wicked and strange when they were not stolid; the bridegroom was there, handsome and silent, showing his white teeth now and then, however, with his tigerish smile.

Leon stepped toward her, the others fell away, leaving them standing side by side, while through the door opposite to that by which she had entered they led forward a cowed and robed figure.

The ceremony began.

Catalina's silence, and her seeming resignation were not altogether born of despair. They were part of a scheme she had hastily arranged. She believed that if she could throw them off their guard the time would come before the mockery of a sacrifice was completed, when she might strike a good solid blow that would cut deeply if not effectually. She deceived even Colonel Dashwood.

Only once had she spoken. Then she suddenly broke in as the padre opened his mouth:

"Can nothing avert my doom?"

"Nothing," in one hoarse word answered the colonel; and the mumbling rite went on.

"You lie!"

In an instant the girl was transformed.

She had been biding her time and her opportunity had arrived.

In the belt of the nearest of the spectators were two revolvers. For some reason he turned away and seemed to be listening for some sound from without.

Before any one could guess her intent she had taken two or three side steps, and with quick, certain grasp she slipped the weapons from their holsters. Then she sprung back, leveling the two muzzles, one at the heart of the would-be bridegroom and the other at the amazed padre, who looked up from his book just in time to see the shining tube dropping in line with his face, and hear her little thumbs force back the hammers with the ease of an expert.

"It shall stop," she flamed out. "Swear it to me now and at once, or these two die. Make a motion, attempt the first act of treachery, and I pull the triggers!"

A wave of excitement swept over the crowd at her brave actions and bold defiance. Leon Cerrado folded his arms with a gesture of resignation; and the padre with stupid amazement depicted in his face, stared open-mouthed at the girl. Only the colonel retained his coolness. There was indeed a cunning smile on his lip as though he saw his way clearly, and it was not altogether an unpleasant one.

Before she could think to turn her pistol from the padre he had her under the muzzle of his own revolver, and was speaking to her in a slow, compressed tone:

"I gave you your choice, and you still have it. You may shoot them or not, as you choose; but either drop those playthings or die."

Doubtless he meant what he said. By the contraction of his brow one could see that the shot was coming; and yet she never flinched. What was to be the end?

There came a strange and sudden interruption. Through the doorway at Dashwood's back a woman sprang lightly, and gliding to his side suddenly threw his wrist upward.

"In the name of heaven!" this woman exclaimed. "Who is this girl, and what is the meaning of this scene?"

It was Varna; and close behind her stepped Victor Page. The two had found their way thither just in time, though no safe place for them was it, since the colonel wheeled like a flash, and hurling Varna aside confronted Victor with threatening face and hand.

"And who are you, who have dared to enter here! Away at once, and without a word, or I will slay you both. If they go not, men, cast them out; and do not be too particular about their bones."

The interruption, and the sound of a woman's voice, caused a momentary wavering in Catalina's purpose. Her eyes wandered to the door, and at once Leon sprang at her like a tiger, and seizing both wrists forced her hands high above her head.

And just then, through the other doorway came two armed men, pistols in hand; and Alabaster Jim in stentorian tones sung out:

"Hold on, thar, kunnell. We mean fun an' you jest bet we'll have it. Ther fust man et moves gits a through ticket, an' a transfer check. Hands up, all, we're on it, an' no discount." The hunted had turned hunters.

CHAPTER XXX.

LEFT IN THE DARK.

SOFT HAND and Alabaster Jim had not neglected the furnishing of their commissary department with supplies at Tierra Roxo. Though these were compressed into small space, and would have seemed a monotonous diet if depended on for any great length of time, they were ready now for a siege of some days. Full of hope they struck out on the track, as they believed, of those for whom they were searching.

It was a bold proceeding, perhaps; but then they were bold men. If it had seemed at all likely that, by storming the ranch, they would accomplish their aim they would have marched straight up to it though Captain Skull and his dozen road-agents were intrenched within.

But they were not so wild as to do such a thing for any uncertain end; and as their special object just now was to get speech with Catalina they were careful to shun the rest of the world. For this they located the ranch by daylight, and kept watch of it at a distance, leaving for night any close approach. As Alabaster Jim said, he knew the country; and evening drew near, and their presence did not seem to be suspected.

The shadows came; and with them came something else. Half a dozen men passed along the trail beneath them, heading toward the hacienda.

Alabaster Jim looked, and then gave a quiet chuckle.

"Pon my soul, Charley, but they're a fine set ov frauds. Yonder goes a padre, gown an' all. Yer s'pose he's needed fur some ov our work! I didn't shoot to kill; but when you begin to physic with them kind ov blue pills it's mighty unsart'in how they'll operate."

"Nothing worse than a broken leg went with mine. There's something else. It might be possible that they've got Wilkins there, and are going to fix up some kind of a job. By heavens! we must see what it is. They won't do much in an hour, and by that time it will be dark enough and late enough to venture up."

"Hyar's with you; we're ther boyees that kin sack the ranch."

Half an hour passed as they waited. They had not yet laid out a positive plan when, from their eyrie, they watched the hacienda fade away in the darkness.

For a wonder Alabaster Jim's tongue was quiet, and so it happened that they heard footsteps cautiously approaching the very spot which they had selected as their hiding-place, though still at a considerable distance.

Up went Jim's hand in a warning gesture.

"Thar's some one c'min'; keep quiet."

"I always am quiet," responded Soft Hand. "You can hear a pin drop when I'm around. I'll take the first one and you reach for the second, if it's any one that is nosing around after us."

But the approaching party had no idea that there was any one there; and though they stepped lightly enough, it was not because they wanted or expected to surprise anybody. The truth was they were fugitives themselves, and were only too anxious to avoid collision with any one. When the pards rose suddenly from the ground to their feet there was a man's oath and a woman's cry; both low, but distinct.

Alabaster Jim pricked up his ears as he heard the faint scream.

"Hands up, pards; we've got yer lined, but I reckon we're friends. We don't want no dizzy nonsense though, an' we ain't trustin' you till we see what yer look like."

"Oh!" exclaimed the woman, "I know your voice. You were with us in the stage-coach and nobly took our part then; I feel sure you will do it again."

"Correct, by mighty! Why ding blast it, you're ther very ducks we's been lookin' fur. In ther name ov all creation what are ye doin' hyar?"

And Soft Hand, stepping forward, repeated the greeting, and the question; in words, however, that were a little better selected, though perhaps not more easy to understand.

The new-comers were Harold and Kate Wilkins, guided by Gomez. At the mutual recognition no one could have been more delighted, and hastily they began an explanation of what had happened at Red Cat Gulch, and how bravely Catalina had spirited them away and furnished them with a hiding-place in the cabin of Gomez. He had provided for their wants until that very evening, when he had come in great excitement and advised an immediate attempt at escape, promising to do his best to pilot them on their way as far as they might need his guidance.

"But the girl! what has become of her? Surely there must have been some reason why she should have come to you no more. She would not have forsaken you after having gone so far."

Soft Hand spoke in haste, and looked down the sloping hillside to where in the distance he could see the twinkling lights of the hacienda.

"No: not of her own accord; but Gomez has learned that she has been a prisoner in the house since the morning she left us. To-night there seems to be some strange scheme on foot in regard to her, and it alarmed him. He hesitated, but carried out his duty to her by looking after us. He doubted if he could aid her; and feared this might be the last chance to help us."

"Well, say, don't it look a leetle small, this cuttin' loose ther tow-line, an' leavin' her to founder? That's low down, an' Alabaster Jim ain't that kind nohow. Me an' my pard, hyar, is goin' to see the circus out; an' you'd better hold on till the canvas drops. Then we'll stick to you."

"But what good can you do? There are a dozen reckless, desperate, well-armed men at that house. Oh, this miserable uncertainty is killing me! Let us go at once!" Kate broke in, hurriedly, and her voice was full of tremulous excitement. It was but seldom that she spoke in the presence of these men; but she could not refrain now. With all the cool courage that she had shown herself possessed of, she was a little hysterical.

"A dozen men!" answered Alabaster Jim, with much disdain. "S'pose ther' were forty. Ther more ther' is ov 'em, ther longer they'll last fur breakfast. We're hyar fur work; ef yer don't b'lieve me, go 'long an' see. Hev yer no-tized anything 'bout me that looks ez though I'd throw off, because a dozen men were double-bankin' a pard? Thunder an' blazes, no! We'll look after her, fust, an' then we'll waltz you out, all sirene."

Gomez was very willing to give up his post as guide to the little outfit, since only his affection for Catalina had led him to take the risk when it seemed that they could do no better. He agreed to remain with them until the re-

turn of the two pards, and then the party must shift for themselves.

Accordingly, having placed Gomez and his charge where they could be easily found, the two began their approach to the hacienda, and entered through one door just as Victor and Varna Page, having passed through another, had drawn all attention to themselves.

As he came Alabaster Jim uttered his note of warning, as already recorded, and at the same time covered the colonel with deadly aim. Soft Hand, silent as ever, acted at once, for springing forward he shot out a lightning-like blow that leveled Leon at once, and from his still clinging fingers tore Catalina away.

One shot did Colonel Dashwood fire wheeling from Victor Page toward Alabaster Jim like a flash, but it went wide of its mark. Varna, as the new-comers made their appearance, had recovered her equilibrium, and aiming to save her brother had sprung at the colonel. Her movement was probably fortunate for Alabaster Jim, but it was certainly so for Dashwood since she cast herself right between the two, a shade before Jim's finger tightened. With a quick turn of the wrist he threw up the muzzle of his weapon and glared around.

It was time that he did so.

A few paces away he saw Soft Hand, with Catalina over his shoulder, aiming at a fierce looking Mexican, who was springing toward him with an uplifted knife.

But beyond him he saw four hands raise, and each hand grasped a pistol that was being brought to bear upon him. As they came to a level each muzzle spit forth its little flash of flame, and its leaden messenger.

Straight forward upon his face fell Alabaster Jim, as quickly as though felled by a well-wielded club; but, as he went there flamed out a shot from the revolver in either hand; and now the room was full of sulphurous smoke. Then there was a thundering crash; the lighted candles in the branching candelabrum were hurled to the floor, and extinguished; for a moment the combatants stayed their hands; and in the black darkness all that was heard was a single groan.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ALABASTER JIM AT BAY.

BUT one person knew the cause of the crash, and the sudden extinction of the lights; and that person was Soft Hand. In danger though he was, from the man with a knife, he had taken time to glance about him, and had seen the peril of his pard.

Instantly he dropped Catalina from his grasp; and firing, sprung forward. He had had his gripe on this same Mexican before, but after this time he would have no use for him again. The bullet had gone home, but before he could fall Soft Hand had him, and seizing him, neck and knees, with one prodigious swing cast him at the lights. Then he let go with his fists left and right, leveling two men whose position he had noted and whose forms he could dimly see, and sprung back noiselessly, to note how fate had treated Alabaster Jim.

That worthy had taken very good care of himself.

At such close range all of the four would hardly miss; and do his best he could not provide for more than two of them. That was the reason he threw himself to the floor, just in time to let their bullets go hissing over him.

His own shots were not thrown away, however; and as, a moment later, Soft Hand tumbled over the other two, the pistol pards rather had the advantage; or at least it was no longer so far from an even thing of it. He gave the groan that was heard, and then, slipping back a few paces, rose quietly to his feet.

At that moment, when Jack was as good as his master, and the chances for victory were fair for the two, they heard without three rapid shots, and then the clanging of a bell and the loud blast of a horn.

Eve had slipped away and was giving a pre-arranged alarm.

The sounds seemed to galvanize new life into the combatants; though in truth all that had happened since the arrival of the unexpected guests had passed with such a flash of continuity that everything was done more rapidly than it has been told.

"Quick!" whispered Soft Hand into his partner's ear, apprised by the cocking of his revolvers, where he stood. "We can fight them as well anywhere else; and if that signal is to bring help it may scoop up our friends as they round in. Follow me to the horses; I have the girl."

"Heave away, I'm with you!" was the answer, and the two made a silent rush for the door.

Before entering they had arranged a little scheme in case of a sudden retreat, and now they carried it out to the letter, for they broke straight for the line of half a dozen mustangs, that stood saddled and waiting, perhaps a hundred yards from the hacienda. A sweep or two of the knife set free the whole caballada, and mounting two they dashed away, driving the rest before them, just as the colonel and his remaining men swarmed out and opened a rapid fire.

An exclamation of his companion startled Alabaster Jim.

"Not hit, are yer pard? he exclaimed. Such a catastrophe might well have happened for the bullets were rattling around them uncomfortably close.

"Hit! No. But by heavens! I've saved the wrong woman."

It was the actual truth, for in the darkness, Soft Hand had exchanged Catalina for Varna, and never noticed it until it was too late to remedy the mistake. She lay motionless upon his arm, and it was only when he saw her flowing skirts and close-fitting turban that he gave utterance to his disgust, as the suspicion darted through his mind. A second look made the suspicion certainty, and checking his speed he caught her by the two wrists, and dropped her carefully to the ground.

"They can take care of her better than I can; and at any rate we don't want such an untamed tiger-cat. She'd murder a cripple with two cents, just to keep her hand in."

Jim looked backward at the form that had dropped in a dark huddle, but said nothing, and a few moments brought them to the little group—Harold Wilkins, Kate and Gomez—who had been listening, full of intense interest, to the sounds of the distant fray.

"Hyar's yer mustang; tumble into saddle quick!" cried Alabaster Jim, as he caught sight of the skulking forms. "We may not salivate ez many road-agents ez some, but we're all death on their hoss-flesh!"

At once Gomez stole away, while the two climbed into their saddles without waiting for assistance; and without listening for sounds of the pursuit, which they knew would follow, the four were off and away, Alabaster Jim taking the lead. He seemed to have no doubt about being able to guide the party through the intricacies of the mountain passes, and their present objective point was Ground Hog Bar, which lay beyond. No one wanted to return to Tierra Roxo, and its inhospitable population.

For an hour they pursued their journey, following a roundabout and by no means easy course. Sometimes they were deep in the shadows; sometimes their way, illuminated by the moon that was not far from full, was bright as day. At times Alabaster Jim was away in their front; again he dropped into the rear. He alike searched out the path and watched for pursuit; and at last stopped suddenly, throwing his left hand backward with a warning gesture, while his right rose straight in front of him, and he bent forward in his saddle, listening intently to the sound of a light footstep, plainly audible, when the little band came to a halt.

They were on a narrow pathway that seemed almost let into the side of the mountain—a flat roadway, perhaps a dozen feet wide. On their right was an overhauling wall of rock, on their left was the clearly-defined edge of a precipice. Not very far away the path seemed to come to an abrupt ending, yet that was the spot that the leader was watching with such steady earnestness.

"Cuss them," he muttered; "they've headed us off right at ther Devil's Doorway, and I hear their steps behind. Ef they ketch us on this ledge they kin pick us off like crow birds out of ther bushes. Why, hind sights an' trigger-guards! Ef it ain't ther leetle sport herself! In ther name ov creation, how did yer git hyar?"

He suddenly changed his tone, and the muzzle of his pistol dropped, for bounding suddenly into view came Catalina.

"I rode the most of the way, and climbed

on feet and hands when the way became the steepest. They tried to throw me back into my prison-house, but they could not befool me twice. I slipped away, met Gomez, who told me of your intentions, and then came to warn you and to join you. Am I welcome?"

"So yer do need me, arter all?" said Alabaster Jim, his mind reverting to the conversation at Irish Molly's. "In course yer welcome; but there's ther chance fur hard knocks an' no glory. We hev no time to fool away hyar."

"No; for they are close at hand. I only headed them off by leaving my mustang and climbing where it would puzzle a goat to find much more than a foothold. You must turn back. I came to warn you. You can go no further here."

"Ye'r' mistooked, leetle 'un. Thar's a dozen er more follerin' us, an' on this kind ov a road it wouldn't be so healthy to try to cut through. Don't you hear 'em?"

There was no mistaking the sound that came to their ears as they listened. The pursuers were close behind, and in force, while further away, beyond the turn, yet evidently rapidly drawing in, was another force. They were caught between two fires.

"Ah, what shall we do?" exclaimed Catalina, desperately. "In such a place numbers will tell. Every turning is a fort. If they only hold them we may die here of starvation. We might indeed swing ourselves over the cliff; but what better off would we be?"

"Keep cool. Ef they hev'n't blocked it up, thar's a chance yit."

He gave an uneasy glance or two toward the rear, but there seemed yet a moment or two to call their own, and he led them forward, until they reached a crevice in the hitherto solid wall to the right.

"One at a time, now an' go slow. Yer can't ride twenty foot; but leave yer mustangs strung along. Up yer go, an' no nonsense. When yer git clean to ther top, give ther rock a tilt and plug ther road shut—I'll go round ther t'other way an' j'ine yer."

There was some hesitation, some demur.

"Go!" said Alabaster Jim, with a sternness that was new to him, and sat strangely on his happy-go-lucky features. "Do yer want to kill me, sure?"

Into the narrow rift three of the party passed, and followed the difficult pass that led straight upward until lost in darkness. It seemed impossible that it should prove a practicable way of escape, confidently as Alabaster Jim had spoken of it.

"So long, pard," said the latter, carelessly, as last of all Soft Hand turned toward the rift. "You won't be out er ther woods, by a long chalk; but do yer level best, an' then, ef ther time kims to go under you won't grumble."

"But I'm not goin'," responded Soft Hand, quietly. "I'm the other kind of a duck altogether; an' not so much a duck as a rooster. We'll try 'em one fly, anyhow."

"You've got to go sooner er later; jist keep watch ov what's kimin' frum behind, an' I'll see what's round ther bend. When I do say skip, though, skip, er I'll plug you. You hear me? Thar's no foolishness about me. I want my chances, er ef you'll say yer know ther country better ner me I'll go 'long with ther rest."

"Have it your own way," hastily interposed Soft Hand, for he saw that his partner meant what he said. Then, he turned his attention to the bend around which they had come, while the other investigated the land in front.

The steps of the pursuers came nearer and nearer; then suddenly stopped. Probably they were suspicious of some trick for everything became wonderfully quiet, until the crack of Soft Hand's revolver awoke the echoes. A man was lying at full length on the ledge, peering around the edge of the bend that had curtailed his approach. Scarcely had his face appeared when it was drawn away again; but the withdrawal was a spasmodic action. At the glimpse Soft Hand had fired—and he missed no marks.

As though the shot was a signal, on either side appeared armed men, ready for a charge, and as coolly as though practicing at glass balls the two opened a fire, rapid and deadly. Three or four shots apiece they fired and then the foe vanished from sight around the bend.

"Now, git!" said Alabaster Jim. "I'm holdin' ther balance ov this yere funeral alone."

There was just one warm clasp of hands,

and then Soft Hand was following after his retreating companions, while Alabaster Jim crouched alone in the little narrow opening, waiting for the foe that again was gathering for another charge.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PARDS STRIKE HARD-PAN.

THE forces gathered for the charge, but after the lesson given them in that one disastrous fire there was no particular hurry about making it. On the contrary, taking a lesson from Alabaster Jim in the past, a white flag was stuck around the corner of the bend to the right, though in that light it was next to impossible to tell white from black.

It was not hard, however, to make Alabaster Jim understand that a parley was wanted; and that suited him very well, for he was anxious to gain time.

"All right," he responded, to the appeal of Colonel Dashwood. "Toot yer horn, ef yer don't sell a clam. I'm hyar, ready fur reason."

"Reason let it be," interposed Colonel Dashwood, boldly stepping forward from behind the shelter of the rock.

"What sense or reason is there in making a fight now? Sooner or later we are bound to have you two."

"That's jist ther same solid chunks ov wisdom yer slung at us down in Red Cat Gulch; can't yer start somethin' fresh?"

"That kind of lightning luck don't strike twice in the same place. And then we were trying to take you alive; while now no one here cares a continental whether you two go under by rope or bullet. Fact is no one is caring for you at all. If you'll hold up your hands and swear never to molest us again we'll let you step out, and I'll pledge you my word that no one here shall harm you between this and 'Frisco."

"You will? Well, my sweet-scented tulip, that's very square fur you—only, I ain't comin'. Ef you think you kin hustle us outer hyar try it. Each on us kin drop his half dozen afore you kin git a fair sight on us, an' we'll hev six shots an' a bowie-knife apiece left. When we git through with them whar will you be? Whar, oh, whar?"

"Oh, but we're not such fools as that. All we have to do is to sit down quietly; and this time we'll do it. We have every chance, and we'll starve you out, or starve you to death. And if you think you can make your escape through the Devil's Door you're very much mistaken, because you've lost your chance. By this time there are half a dozen men on the look out up there, and if they haven't shut the door they are watching, and will kill you one at a time, if you try to escape that way, and we do not overhaul you."

"Starve away, and be hanged," shouted back Alabaster Jim, defiantly. "Pull down yer flag an' git, ther batteries is about openin' fire."

At this abrupt close of the conference the colonel skipped nimbly out of sight, but a voice from the other side took up the strain:

"Be ready, thar, kunnel, when you hear a noise ez though the world hed come to an' end, an' everything broke loose. We're fixin' up a cracker to toss at him, an' when it blows up, sail in. They'll either be dead gone dead, er they'll hev to dodge in."

Alabaster Jim looked around him. Evidently the time for trying whatever desperate scheme he might have in view was just about at hand. The idea of a torpedo was something he had not thought of for he had believed that with the advantages of position, he had, he could hold the spot for an hour or more against an army. Moreover he was more uneasy than he would have cared to own over the reception his friends might meet at the other end of the passage which had been styled the Devil's Doorway. It might be that the colonel was only telling a lie; then again it was as likely as not the truth.

While he listened there came from the narrow passage at his back a hollow rumble, followed by a deep, sudden jar.

The passageway was closed now, no matter whose hands had done the work; and in that direction at least there was no longer any way of escape. Once let the colonel and his men reach the lower mouth of the passage and they

could wall him up alive. How soon, now, was the torpedo to come, to finish the work?

He had not long to wait.

In that time, however, he was not inactive; nor had he deliberately stationed himself there without some plan of action.

The hand-grenade came hissing through the air, its short fusee on fire.

That moment was his chance, since he knew that none would care to expose himself to danger from the petard for the sake of watching how it worked.

At the horn of the saddle on which he had ridden away from Dashwood's hacienda, Alabaster Jim had found a stout, long lariat, and this he now held in his hand. Immediately in front of him a single tree, springing from the rocky ledge, shot out over the precipice, suggesting a way of escape.

Utterly reckless of what might lie beneath him he sprung upon the tree, hastily knotted the lariat to the trunk, and casting the free end into the gulf he slid rapidly down, just passing from sight as the torpedo exploded.

Hardly had he disappeared when the charge came. Had any one thought, at this moment, to look over the verge he might have been picked off as he clung to the rope.

But so intent were they all upon the Devil's Doorway that no one had eyes for anything else. Several random shots were fired and there was prodigious yelling. Then, they dashed into the rift with savage recklessness; and there found unmistakable evidence that Alabaster Jim, at least, had not followed that line of retreat.

"Hush, all of you," said the colonel, holding up his hand. "Perhaps we may hear something of them."

"Not a whisper. It's blowed him away. I wouldn't wonder ef he's landed down in the Bowl."

"An idea," thought Dashwood, and stepping out and across the ledge he saw at once the lariat hanging loosely, and surmised that this was the way the disappearance had been effected. Other eyes saw it too.

"It don't look ez though they both hed time to git away," said one of the party, incautiously approaching, to look over the brink.

Fortunate for him was it that he leaned no further, for, from below, straight upward, there came a shot, that sent his hat spinning, with a bullet hole in the brim, and the ball had gone so near to his nose that for the moment he believed himself hit.

"It makes little difference, and that way you'll never find out either that or anything else, unless you learn it in Kingdom Come. One of you take a rifle, or something, and fish the rope out."

The men were careful enough about it and succeeded in effecting their purpose without drawing any more shots from the skillful marksman that lurked below.

"Now, starve! You're in the Devil's Bowl and no way to get out! We've seen and heard the last of you anyway!"

The colonel shook his fist in the direction of the gash in the mountains where Alabaster Jim was lurking. He evidently thought the world was well rid of such a man.

While this was going on a strong force had entered the rift in the wall and cautiously pursued their way along the strangely-formed pathway.

Before long the darkness grew intense. No moonbeams, bright though they might be, could struggle in here; and it was by no means pleasant to go stumbling along with the possibility that any moment a fugitive might open fire with deadly effect.

The way went on and up, at times growing broader, but for the most part being only wide enough for a single foot passenger. Leon Cerrado, who glided along in the advance, knew the pathway reasonably well, and pursued his way with such confidence that when his foot struck suddenly against some unexpected obstacle he pitched heavily forward, giving vent to a wild yell as he went.

It was fortunate that no one began to shoot; for in that case Leon, springing to his feet, would have been the one to suffer. He had stumbled over the body of a man, lying motionless in the narrow passage. He guessed as much by the feel, for it was too dark to see anything, and having risen again, he stooped and spread out his hand in search of the body.

He found it, and an iron gripe had the

hands that belonged to it, that suddenly clasped his wrists and gave him a pull that there was no resisting. From the inside to the outside he was transferred, almost before he knew it.

Then up sprung the man.

"Shot or blow aimed at me must first go through your leader. Fall back or I open fire over his shoulder."

The footsteps had halted before this, but Soft Hand knew that men were lurking in the passage, and as he had found his progress blocked by a huge stone that he was unable to move, he had just decided that he must go back and trust his chances at the point of entrance when he heard the explorers coming toward him.

His movements resulted in their being disconcerted, and as there was nothing to be lost, they obeyed his order.

As they receded he advanced, and close at their heels burst out of the rift.

But as he came, with a revolver in one hand and Leon in the other, some one played upon him the same trick that he had played upon Cerrado, dropping right in his pathway.

Down he went, firing one fruitless shot, and then upon his back there sprung three or four men.

At once he was helpless, bound, prisoner, while Colonel Dashwood stood over him, with a mocking sneer.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LIFE-STRUGGLE ON THE LEDGE.

THE gentleman from Cinnabar, as the reader very well knows, was not much given to talking, and however bravely he might strike out in a hopeless conflict, so long as his blows went home he was not much given to exertion that could not possibly bear fruit of any kind.

In this crisis, he made just one tremendous effort, and seeing that he might as well try to lift the mountain, he then remained without speech or motion.

A couple of rough hands jerked him up from his position, face downward upon the ground, and propped him up against the wall of rock. As the bright moonbeams slanted down on his face, they showed no trace of anxiety or fear; only a cold, scornful smile. Yet he was thinking of the scene in the vaults of the ruined mission, just before he had been entombed alive. Could he expect any more mercy now?

Not very much, for Colonel Dashwood was his mortal enemy, and when he glanced away from him his eyes fell upon the cold, dark face of Varna Page. She too was here; in at the death as it seemed. At sight of her he could scarcely suppress a start, though her presence need not have been a surprise. Had he not himself told her that which would bring the two together?

He looked from the one to the other, and wondered, perhaps, how far explanations had gone between the two, or whether there had been any explanations at all.

And Varna looked down at him with a strange gleam in her eye, as, advancing, she placed her hand upon his shoulder.

"Man, man," she whispered, "as you hope for mercy answer in truth."

"Hold on, miss or madam, I'm not hoping for mercy. I've been there, and I've got more hope in an honest pard and my good hand and eye than in all the mercy ever invented. Don't waste words over a man like me, but let things slide along in the groove that Nature makes for them. The sooner it's over, the better fur one of us."

"The sooner what is over?"

"Life; death; whatever is to happen. You'll own I've no good cause to love you after the little game you played on me not so long ago, and if I haven't a notion for revenge, it's because I wouldn't like to strike a woman. Now, that brother of yours I'd take out of the damp in a minute, if he gave me a chance to do it honestly; but you're different material. Only, half-way forgiving as I may be, you can stake your life I'll do you no favor, so don't make yourself small asking it. You and Allan, yonder, should understand each other by this time."

"Allan? my brother? It is false. Your lie moved us somewhat, and we went to seek him with a shade of hope and a cloud of fear. One glance was enough. He may be a vile man; but he was our friend in that he swore to

ride you down. He helps me to my vengeance while he follows his own."

"It's a pity such a handsome woman should be so big a fool. Tell them to drive on with the hearse. I'll say nothing more to you."

He could not have chosen words that would have angered her more.

"So be it, Pierre Redette. I might perhaps even yet have saved you, false father, perjured husband, treacherous friend that you have been. Now I leave my revenge in the hands of one who will make it as complete as even I could dream of."

She asked no more questions but turned away and took her stand by Victor Page.

Then Dashwood shot his bolt.

"Your friend is somewhere below; and it is as certain as death that he never will get out. I have had some little differences with you two, but I still have a little compassion, and for fear that he may grow lonesome, I'm going to send you down to join him."

He paused, and touched his face at the spot the bowie-knife of Alabaster Jim had pierced when that worthy pinned him to the wall.

"I wouldn't do it, colonel. He's a bad man by himself, and if we two once get together again, there'll be music in the air, and learn it by heart if you don't believe me."

"I'm afraid it is the truth you're telling; but I don't intend to send you quite all the way. We'll fix it so you'll be in sight of each other. That will be enough enjoyment for you; and for me, too. I'd study out some better, slower, more glorious plan, but I'm in too great a hurry now. Half a dozen of my friends were at the other end of the Devil's Door, and no doubt made a capture. Unfortunately they no doubt had a wholesome fear of the pistols of yourself and friend, and so closed the doorway when they had gathered in the ungrateful girl who I know joined you here. A journey around for a mile or so is no joke but I suppose it must be taken. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, except that unless all signs are false I'll live to see you hung."

"Then turn him off!" sharply ordered the colonel, totally ignoring the insult.

The meaning of his covert threat became apparent.

He had already whispered his orders while Varna held her little conversation with the prisoner. Now several men advanced.

From the end of the lariat rope they cut off perhaps a dozen feet. It had not touched the ground before but they wished to make it a certainty.

Then around his neck they knotted the end and stood waiting for further orders.

"You are sure it will not slip, or be uncomfortably loose?"

"It's tied right thar, an' it won't come loose till ther rope breaks."

"Well, Mr. Soft Hand, or Mr. Pierre Redette, or Mr. Man from Cinnabar, or whatever your name may be, the case stands thusly. There are, I judge, some forty to sixty feet of that rope, which will not touch bottom by a long sight. There is a noose around your neck; but in case of accident I don't depend at all on strangulation. The rope may break, but the point is that the momentary stoppage at the end of say sixty feet drop will prove exceedingly unhealthy for the spinal marrow. Good-morning. Over with him."

The great, cruel brutes caught up their victim and dragged him toward the edge of the ledge, and for a few seconds poised him there, waiting to hurl him out into nothingness.

It was at that moment that Soft Hand, in whose face not the twitching of a muscle or the shadow of a change of color had been visible, made his supreme effort.

Wrapped, as he was, with cords, and held by four strong hands, it seemed as though he could do positively nothing; yet even then he was not altogether so helpless as to effect nothing.

One hand at least he tore free, and with one straightforward blow he lifted the brute at his right clear from his feet, and out into nothingness. As his despairing cry rung up, his comrade struck Soft Hand's feet from under him, and pushed him over the brink.

Yet even then he did not at once fall, for by chance his arm struck across the overhanging tree to which the rope was knotted.

With a shriek Varna rushed forward. This seemed to her more terrible even than the scene in the old vaults; but Colonel Dashwood caught her rudely by the shoulder, just as Soft

Hand's arm unclasped from the tree and he dropped from sight.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IRISH MOLLY HOLDS THE DROP.

SOFT HAND dropped; but not, indeed, to instant death.

He had no well defined idea of why he acted, but act he did, and when his arm unclasped from the tree it was of his own volition. He preferred risking his chances now, before his strength was all exhausted in fruitless endeavors.

At the very outset he had to face a fearful chance; but he threw all upon the risk. As his arm slid away from the tree his hand slid along the rope that for the moment, bending his head sideways, he grasped convulsively with his teeth.

Then he had the rope in his hand and was sliding slowly down. It scorched, it burned, it almost tore his arm from its socket, but with tightly clinched teeth and straining nerve he still held on. If he let go there was the drop, and the noose, which, had his one hand been free, he could not have loosened; and below, a broken neck.

What better it would be save a prolongation of agony he knew not, for at the end what escape could there be from strangulation.

Fortunately for him the men above never for a moment dreamed of any possibility of escape. A shot would have made the result certain at first, though before many yards he was at least safe from them since the rope trending outward a little with the swell of the bank, then dropped under its overhanging shade and just hid him from their sight. They might cut the rope—at the risk of bullets from below—but they could not harm him directly.

An age it seemed, for its agony; yet the end of the rope was fearfully near. Clinging blindly, with blood dropping from his torn palm, and an awful numbness beginning to creep through his arm he knew he could hold on but a little longer. Once or twice he had relieved with his teeth the strain upon his hand. He tried it now for the last time.

It was just at this moment that he heard the hearty voice of Alabaster Jim; and never were sounds more welcome.

"Hold on, pard! Don't yer try it alone; lemme assist—steady now. Ther drop ain't more ner a dozen feet an' I don't b'lieve you'll break ary a bone. We'll make it warmer ner a hundred volcanoes with all ther blowers on fur them cusses yit; I owe 'em one er two, I do. Hold fast a minnit; I'm with yer."

It was very little use to tell him to hold fast for it was life or death with Soft Hand about doing it; but Alabaster had to say something, and that was the best he could think of, while he sprung to one side to gain a vantage ground.

Then—crack! His heavy six-shooter spoke, and there was a twang and a quiver from one end of the rope to the other as the ball struck it a few inches above Soft Hand's grasp.

Crack! There was another shot, a snapping of strands and down dropped Soft Hand, with his feet well under him, and all his wits still about him.

The drop was perhaps a dozen feet, but he lit lightly, stumbled, rose up, began a careless speech; and then suddenly fainted away. The strain had been a little more than even his magnificent nerves could stand.

Above there was a strangely excited crowd of whom not one had yet formed the belief that Soft Hand would succeed in escaping.

Yet, as they watched the rope where it hung from the tree, they had heard the report of Alabaster Jim's revolver, and then saw the thrill and jerk of the lariat as it parted below. Then they saw it swing loosely, and knew that whatever else might be, Soft Hand no longer swung to the end. Were rope and neck broken by a fall; or, in some miraculous way, had he escaped?

From below there came up no answer.

"Drag up the rope again. If they like it down there let it be so," said Colonel Dashwood hastily. "A goat couldn't climb out, and when we have time we'll come back and shoot them at our leisure while we bury the dead."

His thoughts now were turning toward what might be at the further end of the Devil's Door. From the fact that the passageway was closed he knew that some one had passed through, and that probably the men on the look-out above, to whom he had signaled by

means of a torch, had probably made a capture. He knew nothing with certainty, but he believed that Catalina had made her way through the rifted passage, and he suspected that perhaps Harold Wilkins and Kate might be found in her company. In fact he suspected a great deal more than the truth, and this was what made him so anxious to go forward.

Catalina entered the passageway first, and the others followed her quite bravely. Alabaster Jim seemed to know that the road was safe to traverse; and at the other end they could scarcely find anything worse than they had left behind.

The journey through the darkness, though not so very long, appeared almost interminable, and when a gush of fresh air seemed to tell them that they were nearing the outlet it raised their spirits wonderfully. Out they crept, for at the last the passage was very narrow, upon a rocky crest of the mountain, passing by a huge boulder that was just poised at the edge of the rift.

As they came into the open air three men bounded up a pathway that led around the rock, and before they well knew how it was done they were prisoners.

Three as brawny, reckless, dare devil ruffians they had never seen. The cold moonlight has a wonderful trick of bringing the hidden heart of a villain to his face, and so it was that these three looked all their nature. Kate gave a little scream as the leader put his hand rudely upon her shoulder.

"No use to squirm, leetle gal; we've got yer foul. Up with yer hands all ov yer, while we take a twist 'round 'em. We can't hear ther steps; but there's more to come."

"This ar' fun," added a second, "but s'pose we lock ther door afore ther rest kims out. I ain't hankerin' arter a bout with them pistol pards, ef them's ther galoots ther's makin' thet rattlin' little ruction below thar. Let ther capt'n draw his own badgers."

"Yes. Knock the wedge out. They can't git away, then, sure; an' thar's only three ov us hyer ef they should make a rush."

The boulder at the edge of the rift was the door that the outlaw meant, and it was nicely poised, and held in place by a single wedge. A few strokes and the stone, loosened from its place, toppled over and went rolling downward a dozen yards into the passage and then came to a sudden halt against a shoulder of rock where the way was the narrowest. Half a dozen men might move the rock from the upper side; a dozen could not force it from below.

"And now, my beauties, for you. You're sharp ones to slip through ther captain's fingers, but you'll go no furdur. Ez fur this sickly-lookin' galoot, ther best plan 'u'd be to chuck him right over hyer, where it's a thousand foot down."

The leading spirit made a step forward, with a motion as though he had some notion of carrying his proposition immediately into effect.

"Hold on, pard. Good hevings! You wouldn't drop him afore you went through his pockets? Why, you must be dreamin'!"

"Kerrect, by mighty! Neighbor, shell out. Ther size of yer pile will settle the vally ov yer neck. If ther lead pans out well it may pay ter handle it keerfully. Ef it don't I don't keer how soon it drops."

The three ruffians seemed to think that they would have a pretty easy thing managing two girls and an invalid, all of whom had seemed almost dumfounded and without thought of resistance.

"But hi such things 'you can't most always sometimes tell.' It would have been better to have followed first intentions, and deferred closing the 'door' until the prisoners were secured. Mr. Wilkins always was a little slow to decide, but when his mind was actually made up he acted like a flash. As the man approached him he sprung forward like a cat, struck two sharp blows, left and right, the last of which leveled him flat, and then strove to draw the revolver at his back which so far he had seen no opportunity to draw.

The movement seemed a reckless, and well-nigh a useless one, for on the instant out came the pistols of the remaining bandits. They were cautious, wily fellows, and preferred using lead to advancing on this developing athlete. Up went their hands and before Wilkins could have drawn he would have been a dead man had not Catalina, leaping forward, thrown her arms around him, exclaiming:

"Shoot if you dare! Your bullets must go through me to reach him and you can guess what reckoning Colonel Dashwood will make if he finds me dead at your hands. We will surrender, but down with your weapons!"

And as her sharp voice ceased another one took up the strain, in a rich, rolling brogue:

"Yes; down wid yer hands, er it's cowl'd mate Oirish Molly'll be makin' av yer. Don't yez turn the twinkln' av a finger fur it's both av yez I've kivered."

And up upon the plateau at their backs, a cocked revolver in either hand, stepped the Irishwoman.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TEMPORARY LULL.

It might have saved trouble if Irish Molly had neglected to insert her name in her address; though she had a local reputation for being a woman that was most thoroughly able to take her own part. But two men such as these were scarcely could be bluffed by a woman. They looked at each other, gave a sign, and in a twinkling had turned together. Perhaps they had doubts whether there was any danger, and if she meant what she said their sudden movement might disconcert her aim.

But never were two men more mistaken. It was their own aim that proved to have been altogether wild, and down they dropped from two rapid shots.

With a glad cry Catalina sprung forward.

"Ah, you have come! I am so happy, for now we will be safe. Who would have thought to see you here? What brought you? How will we fly away?"

"Sure, an' it's too many questions it's yer asking me. It wor yer own purty face that brought me, aided by two r'azonably stout legs, an' it's that same last that will take me away. It's wild I've been since yez lift me fur fear ye'd come to harrum; an', be the same token, I've been in some danger meself. Then, ye spalpeen, it's little mischief ye'll do wid yer hands tied behind yer back."

The latter part of the speech was made to the man that Wilkins had floored, and who had begun in a wandering sort of way to make preparations to get up and take another hand in the game. Then the four looked at each other and held a council of war.

Irish Molly's adventures had been almost a story in themselves, for she had been carried off by some of Captain Skull's men when others of their comrades had taken possession of her ranch, and it was only that evening she had succeeded in making her escape. She knew little more about the mountains than did Catalina, and was not prospectively the best of guides, though her appearance inspired them all with new courage.

With a blind faith in fortune they turned away from the spot and began to descend the mountain side, first, however, having drawn freely on the arsenals of weapons the two dead and the one living man had strapped around them.

At the other end of the Devil's Door a single man remained on guard, if by chance he could pick up any intelligence of what was going on below; but no sounds could he hear, and down in the shadows of the great sink-hole, a score of men might have lurked and he not have been any the wiser.

Alabaster Jim was somewhat alarmed when he saw his comrade fall; but a careful examination convinced him that it was only a fainting fit. To be sure, it seemed a little odd to see a man in a swoon, but certainly Soft Hand had had a trial of the nerves severe enough to be a sufficient excuse for the unmanly act. Yet, when he came to his senses again and found Jim bending over him, he felt as cheap as though he had been caught with his hand in a blind beggar's pocket.

However, he rapidly recovered his strength, and soon was upon his feet again.

"Tore yer hand up purty badly; thar ain't another man in the mines could hev did it, an' I'll bet rocks on it. Kin yer hold a shooter yit, er am I to hev ther fun an' you git ther profits?"

"I can keep up my end, hands or no hands, but I don't see that there is going to be much call for laughter. From what I heard we're in a regular trap, out of which there's no getting unless some one lowers a rope. If you figure on our friends up yonder doing any such

little favor you're not the sharp I take you for."

"Rope be hanged. That galoot thinks he's posted; but thar's a wrinkle er two that he ain't fly to. We might tumble a couple of hundred feet furdur down an' git squelched; but I ain't a-tumblin'. An' we might stay hyar an' starve; but I ain't a-starvin'. I kin take yer out blindfolded, an' I'll do it. Then we'll git right down ter bizness. I could 'a' plugged that kunnel a dozen times but I held my hands. You bet I don't do so no more."

"I begin to think so myself. It's a mystery how it comes you didn't corral him when you had the chance."

"Because I wanted to see him hung. I swore I'd have him strung up an' I hate to go back on my word. But then I didn't say livin'. I kin hang his stiff. Wonder I didn't think ov that afore."

This cheerful view of the case put Alabaster Jim in sudden good humor; and Soft Hand himself felt a sudden hopefulness, for despite his cool acceptance of whatever ill luck fate sent him he was not one to take a roseate view of things. He followed his guide with a step that rapidly gained strength, and together the two carefully threaded their way along the verge of a chasm that went still further down into the bowels of the mountain. Fortunately for them they had been forced over the brink above at the one only place where they could have escaped a horrible death.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BEGINNING TO UNMASK.

SLOWLY and cautiously Irish Molly led the way down the side of the mountain, winding along a devious path that, however, always bore downward. More than once they had to pause to consider their way; once or twice they had to drop over a ledge or leap across a rift. Sometimes they were in perfect shade; sometimes the moonbeams, slanting across their course, made it light as day. Altogether their progress was slow.

A short time after they had left the plateau above there was a new development in the game. A man's head was carefully raised over the further edge of the little plateau, and then a body followed.

The new-comer seemed one of the same gang, and quite noiselessly he approached the spot where the two dead outlaws lay, and the one living was sitting disconsolately with his hands bound behind his back.

"Hello! What's to pay here? This looks like a nasty sort of mess, and I wouldn't be in your boots, nohow. What are you doing now?"

"I've been waiting fur daylight—couldn't go down this hyer way, I'd broke my neck fust jump. Cut me loose, now you've come, an' maybe we won't be too late yet. Cusses on 'em."

While the cords upon his wrists were being cut he added a few hasty explanations; and he being furnished with a revolver at once the two started off in pursuit. As they knew the road they gained rapidly on the fugitives and at length saw them just as they dropped over from a ledge to a level plateau.

Toward this point of disappearance the worthies advanced cautiously, and as they approached they heard voices below. When they looked down, fairly revealed in a flood of moonlight they saw a striking tableau.

When the four had reached the ground and a firm footing they became aware that some one was approaching, and in silence they stood, for they had no doubt but that the enemy was coming at least a dozen strong.

Although the four, now, were all well armed, it can easily be supposed that they had no desire to face a gang of road-agents, who were reckless enough and desperate enough to stop at nothing, and who outnumbered them somewhere about three to one.

Yet they had no thought of giving in. If a fight had to come it might as well be now as any other time, and perhaps better. Here they had the advantage of position, and if they had tried to do it could hardly have drawn the outlaws into a neater little ambushade. There might be time to fire several shots apiece before the assailants could locate them well enough to try a volley.

Catalina, whose courage was certainly as great as that of any of the others, alone seemed

to wish to shirk the coming fight. She was nearest to Irish Molly, and her she touched lightly on the shoulder.

"Promise me that you will not kill him if you can help it. He may be no kith nor kin to me, as I begin to believe; but he *has* been kind to me until of late and I cannot bear to see him die."

"The colonel, you mane? Arrah! If the bloody-minded spalpeen won't listen to raizon it's a corpse o'll be afther makin' av him. But, whist! It's comin' they are."

The whispered warning was none too soon, for a moment later they came in sight; but Catalina's words had had their effect.

Colonel Dashwood strode silently on in the advance, and at his elbow was Varna, a strange light in her eyes.

Suddenly before them, scarcely more than a dozen paces away, four dark forms rose up and confronted them; and along the little line there was a quick, ominous cocking of revolvers, while Irish Molly's voice rung out, clear and full:

"Halt, there, colonel, me jewell! Another shtep an' ye'r a dead mon. Tell yer b'yes to kape back while I raizen wid yez. I've got yez covered, an' it's moighty seldom that I miss me aim."

The surprise was complete, for Dashwood had been thinking of something else, and when he looked up, there was the unwavering hand outstretched, and the glistening barrel that covered him fairly.

"Don't yez thry to draw on me, colonel, er down yez go. Tell yer men to kape back, er I'll foire, anyhow. There's four av us an' we're dead shots. Give the word to kape back."

It was a shock to his pride, no doubt; but the colonel temporized. Perhaps, at the worst, he would have hesitated before striking at the life of a woman; and in this case he had not a doubt but that a movement would bring a shot.

"Come, Molly," he said, in a quiet, easy way, "I have heard that you have had a rough time of it, but that was not my fault. You shouldn't get mixed up with disreputable characters. Put up your weapons; let your friends then, of whom I see that ungrateful girl is one, do the same, and we'll talk the matter over. I can guarantee that, after certain pledges on your part, you at least will be allowed to go free. Your ranch needs you badly enough, I have no doubt."

"It's let me go free, will yez? Be the powers! it's shoot oi've a moind to. It's sea grane yez are to talk that when ye'r my pris'ner, an' oi was just in a brown study ef we'd let you. Hold up yer hands, colonel, an' shtep straight up, an' ef a mon shows more av his nose nor I see now, er crooks a finger, you'll be fuller av holes ner a skimmer."

A mocking laugh came from behind the colonel's back. The situation had its ludicrous side.

"Ha, ha! kunnel," exclaimed one of his men. You're treed anyhow; but say the word and we'll just make ther liveliest kind ov a rustle round hyer."

"No, no. Keep quiet a moment, she will certainly listen to good sense; and the rest will hardly carry on the game when she gives up."

"I tell yez," interposed Molly, wrathfully, "if yez care for loife ye'll do az I say. Step out, oi'm toired av waitin' an' I'm goin' to be gon."

"Don't yer move a step kunnel. You hear us? Drop that barker, Irish, er inside ov a minute an' a half, you'll be a dead ole gal. An' you, too, Mr. Man. We've got you foul."

A hoarse voice broke in, just in the nick of time for Dashwood, and over the ledge leaned the two outlaws, each poising a pistol, at the distance of a yard or two. All that was needed was to pull the triggers, and it would be good-morning for Harold Wilkins and Irish Molly.

"Lost!" exclaimed Catalina, at the appearance of this new phase, and she dropped her hand, while the colonel gave utterance to a triumphant laugh.

"There's never anything lost biding your time. Now I'll dictate the terms, for you'll scarcely rush on to certain death. Up, half a dozen of you men and secure them. Down with those pistols, throw them down!"

"Down they are!"

One, two! The sharp reports of two revolvers echoed on the mountain side, and the

men that had been kneeling on the ledge sprung convulsively into the air and fell, all doubled up and ghastly, to the ground below, while out upon the plateau stepped Alabaster Jim and Soft Hand, with extended and well-weaponed hands, ready for work.

"I reckon we're hyer to play ther game fur what it's wuth, so deal us a hand, er pass the keerds. Kunnel, I want yer!"

But, as the silvering moonbeams fell upon the faces of the two, some one else took a hand. Dashwood stood well in front, his men were still in the background, and half way between was Varna, who, at the resurrection of these men was impressed with no uncanny, superstitious fear, but rather maddened by the sight of him whom nothing would slay. With a quick, certain swing she jerked her revolver into line and fired. For a snap shot there never was a more deadly aim.

Yet fate, and his own skill, still guarded Soft Hand. There could be no question now about his wonderful shot at the Star of Empire saloon, for lightning never strikes by chance twice in the same place; and he had repeated the shot. With a rapid turn of his wrist he had aimed at the revolver that menaced him, and shot it out of Varna's hand.

He was in time to save himself; but the fraction of a second too late to prevent those slender little hands from working mortal harm. Her bullet went wide of the intended mark, for, as her echoing report rung dully on the ears of all, the colonel gave a short groan, staggered, swayed, threw up his arms and dropped heavily to the ground.

"Oh, Varna," he muttered, "you have killed me," and the woman hearing the low, half-uttered words in spite of her sudden consternation, gave a scream and flung herself forward, and down by his side.

The odds had become almost evens now, but the half-dozen of the colonel's men gave a shout and massed for a mad rush, when Alabaster Jim sprung forward, tearing from his head hat, wig and false beard, and stood before them with flashing eyes and well-weaponed hands.

"Back!" he shouted. "I swore I'd exterminate you and hang him, and I'd have kept my word but for a woman's hand. Who wants to step forward here—and die?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE END AT LAST.

THERE was a cry of recognition and of consternation at the sudden unmasking of Alabaster Jim. The change itself was enough to cause a thrill of wonder for now he was no longer the lounging, easy-going, reckless but not altogether evil sport. Instead there stood revealed a hard, cruel, iron-willed man, who would, in another instant push the advantages of his wondrous skill to the utmost.

"Back!" he cried again. "Leave, vanish by the shortest path! You know me, I hope, and that I never speak in vain."

The consternation ripened into a panic. No one wanted to face those deadly revolvers, backed as they were by the silent man behind him, who was fingering his own weapons as though itching to begin. And Irish Molly and her little flock were ready to chip in. They wheeled in a disorganized mob, and falling back in haste the retreat soon became a rout.

Meantime Varna knelt over the wounded man, with his head upon her knee. Through all the changes of disguise and years she knew him now; and looking into the paling face she knew, too, that death was not far off. Her bullet had gone through and through and made a wound that must be mortal.

"Oh, my brother!" she whispered into his ear, as though unwilling to allow her grief to be heard by others. "To have lost you; to have mourned over you; to have avenged you; and to have you die by my hand at last! What cursed fate has maddened me so that I had to drift to this doom? I can only die now, since I have found you to slay you."

Then this singular woman, who was willing to carry revenge to the utmost and most horrible limit, wept, and moaned, between her sobs covering the whitening face with kisses. Under the revelation of Soft Hand she had been reasonably calm, for his statement was too wild for belief, and she was only willing to

test its truth by biding her time. Yet it had prepared her somewhat, so that the shock of his approaching death swallowed up the shock of knowing that he was alive at all.

And yet there was something more to come. He looked at her, with just the pale ghost of a smile around his lips, as though, even in death, there was something that could amuse him.

"Don't take on so, Varna; you're no sister at all. Do you think any sister would have carried hate and revenge as far as you have done? It's a ghastly joke. Victor knew."

Then she did start.

"Oh, you need not stare. We were a queer family, and you were adopted into it when you were an infant, and for years we boys were never the wiser. You've got two husbands, to my knowledge; but you never cared for them as you did for me. Pity it was I could not have returned the compliment in time."

She still stared at him, half believing that the near approach of death had unsettled his mind.

"No, I'm not crazy. It is the truth. I've kept trail of your ins and outs. You wanted to know something about your daughter—I can tell you. Yonder she stands; the little thing with the light hair; and it's her father beside her. She scarcely looks as much like you as that black-eyed girl I picked up to some day bring forward in her place—for, until a few days ago, I thought her dead. I had an eye for the millions, too, you see."

"What? Where? I do not understand."

Varna never turned her head, but gazed down into the face of the colonel—or Allan Page—in a dazed way. Near her, Victor stood listening, his face as cold as ever, and yet sorrowing.

"You thought Pierre Redette turned me adrift. It was the other way. You must have cared something for him, though not as you did for me, or you would not have been so outraged because he stood between me and my intended victim. Poor Lily!"

"And what became of her?" asked Varna, a gleam of the old savagery coming back to her eye.

"She died. He shot her when I and the crew were beating him down as he stood her only defender. It was a chance shot; and time has revenged it. I was wild then, and turned him adrift. Whoever of the crew, told you of it had the names mixed; for I had provided for that. Then my life turned worse than ever. I came to the West, lived a dog's life, and like a dog am dying."

"No, no! Can nothing be done? I would give my soul to save you. I never suspected before how I loved you."

"Thank you. You were a handsome woman, but somehow I don't banker after other men's wife. I forgive you, but that is all I can say. Go back to your husbands."

"My husbands! I do not understand!"

"Yes, there are two of them. Yonder man, I tell you, is Herman Knox, though he calls himself Wilkins now. He has been living in Mexico—and would have gone to the further end of the sea to have got away from you, so much he feared you."

"Herman Knox! oh, no. He is dead years ago."

"Not very much. He is always dying and never dies. He stole your daughter and his. If I had known the whole story in time I might have killed him; now it is too late. But Pierre Redette knows the story; perhaps you might stir up his jealous rage enough to induce him to kill him."

"He! No; he will only be too glad to know that the selfish woman who inveigled him into the form of a marriage was never nearer than a mistress. Good heavens! How all things have worked together for the worst!"

"The very worst. Her uncle's fortune will never come into your hands, neither will that of Pierre Redette. Your daughter and Herman Knox will enjoy the one, Pierre Redette, himself, the other. I am going, and you and Victor can hatch out new plots together, if these men spare you. After all, you can't blame them if they don't. I thought I had killed the one, you thought you had killed the other; and I did my best to clap on an appendix that should finish his life entirely. Good heavens! how I hated him! And then, he killed poor Lily. He is watching me now. If you or I moved a finger, he would slay us, and I don't want to lose my few last minutes."

"Hush, hush! You talk to much. Victor and I can live. Your voice grows weaker, say no more. What care I for the rest of the world? Oh, my darling, how I could have loved you if I had only known!"

He pressed her hand and said nothing, though the dubious smile came again to his lips. The slow, internal hemorrhage still went on, and he was dying as he lived.

Herman Knox half-drew his daughter aside. Probably he guessed somewhat of the revelations that might be made, and hoped that Kate might hear none of them. Irish Molly, the masculine tempered stockwoman brooded over the pair with an almost motherly care, and by and by the Pistol Pards joined them, Soft Hand looking somewhat solemn, for he knew somewhat of the strange story that the colonel had been telling.

He drew Wilkins a little further aside.

"Don't have any hard feelings toward me. You can have her. After that brute had turned me adrift, and I had got ashore, and had my eyes open and by mere chance heard of you I skipped. I don't want her. Take her and be happy."

"Take whom? Who are you? and how does it come that you are mixed in with my life?"

"Who? Why our wife. I was Pierre Redette, but that is my name no longer. Call me Charles Jones. I wouldn't leave her such a handle to find me by. You understand? I married her when I thought she was a widow and of late years she has been trying to duplicate that situation. I don't wonder you skipped. I reckon our best plan would be to waltz out now and leave her alone with her dead. And still I'd have given a thousand never to have struck yonder camp. I'm not an angel; but I'm no hunter of men, and the last week or so has been too full of blood and murder even for me. Come, I'll finish my contract and see you safe through to 'Frisco."

"It is well as it has happened, yet might have been better. Yet we are in no little danger yet. Captain Skull may be dying; but there are enough of his outlaws lurking near to give us trouble yet. If we fall into their hands we cannot expect such wonderful luck always."

"Have no fear. These men are not always as bad as their reputation. Captain Skull was not."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Alnabater Jim at their elbow. "How do you know?"

"Because, with every chance in his favor he lies yonder dying."

Soft Hand spoke a little sharply. There was something about the manner of his late pard that jarred upon his nerves.

"Not much. Yonder man is a rank impostor. He was only a petty lieutenant that was trying to work the line from both ends. He and Pedro Mercado and some of the gang put up a job to murder their captain and thought they had succeeded, but they were bunglers after all. He came to life, swore revenge, and had it. I am Captain Skull."

"Peace or war?" shouted Soft Hand, and his fingers closed over his revolvers.

"Oh, peace it is. You'd hardly go back on the man that dug you out of Santa Brigada, and saved your life a dozen ways. We'll journey a little piece together, and then swing apart. I've turned a new leaf now and am off for safer pastures where I can browse on the square. But when we two pull together we make a rustling team, and don't you forget it."

And so Varna was left with her dying, with Victor to watch over her. Catalina gave one last glance at the man who had been kind to her and yet would have driven her to death or ruin, Knox gathered his daughter in his arm and shielded her from a knowledge of the truth, and Irish Molly, rough but a diamond, brooded over them in a motherly way as they left the fateful spot. For them all, for the present, at least, there was no more trouble, though when they should swing apart, no one could tell what the future might bring.

The dying words of Allan Page so nearly explain the missing links of the story that but little more need be added. To the Pages would never come the fortunes of either Kate Knox or Pierre Redette, and Varna certainly, in parlor and court, had lost claim to all her husbands, though she might live long to regret the strange fortune that arrayed against her and hers the Pistol Pards.

THE END.

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